

Learning in/from peripherality:
The agency of municipal institutions through
governance and welfare restructuring in Inner Areas

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ABSTRACT

Geographically uneven development represents a significantly complex challenge to the sustainable and just transition of peripheral places and regions. Several grand societal challenges and uneven development outcomes have long affected peripheral places, and continue hampering opportunities for pathbreaking and path creation. Peripheral areas nonetheless have experienced a wide array of resistance practices that experiment with initiatives and themes around housing, employment, and services. Municipal public administrations play a pivotal role in these, arising from their administrative function, their symbolic representation of democracy and public interest, and their embodiment of a sense of responsibility towards community wellbeing. While no consensus emerges in Economic Geography (EG) around the definition, role, and functioning of institutions (including their evolution and change), existing interpretations and operationalisations often consist in vague conceptualisations, or relegate them to a more ‘passive’ role on the regulation or incentivisation of economic activities. On the other hand, I argue institutional agency in uneven development contexts to be transformative in nature, i.e., acting as a catalyst for pathbreaking and path creation towards more sustainable and just futures.

This perspective aligns with calls in EG for a more relational and agency-based perspective on path creation. Micro-scale analyses of transformative agency are needed, to provide highly territorialised insights on specific actors (possibly based on their own perspective), and on how their actions are meaningfully and purposefully directed towards spatial justice. This is especially relevant for welfare and services in areas affected by geographically uneven development outcomes, as the resulting arrangements to organise and govern provision systems often also entail a restructuring of institutions — e.g., through remunicipalisations and intermunicipalisation of welfare and services, and multi-actor, community-based forms. However, transformative institutional agency faces several obstacles related to both structural constraints and agentic dynamics. Some of these are well-known in policy and academia, such as the lack of human resources; the thinness, low differentiation, and/or uneven distribution of actors; and the scarcity of financial budgets to design and implement projects and initiatives. Others are more covert and complex, and require in-depth investigations of institutional agency: the presence of organisational and socio-cognitive challenges that hamper alignment, cooperation, and the establishment of intermunicipal forms of collective agency; the asymmetry of power relations with higher-level administrative actors and policy-/decision-makers; and a somehow internalised ‘haemorrhagic narrative’ of

depopulation and decline, which has only recently been contested and reframed thanks to the action of place-based leaders and local communities.

Based on the centrality of institutions in local and regional development processes, on the agency they embed and exercise for pathbreaking and path creation, and on their constraints and obstacles, the following research investigates the role of municipal institutions (i.e., municipal public administrations) in local and regional development processes that aim at transforming peripheral territories towards sustainable and spatially just futures. The research is centred around the questions of how municipal institutions in peripherality contexts make sense of, embody, frame, and negotiate peripherality, uneven development processes, and transformative resilience, to then ask how these institutions legitimise local and regional development policy and other specific actions and strategies implemented at the local level. The whole research project is based on an in-depth, mixed-methods analysis of a case study in the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area in the Abruzzo Region, Italy, whose transformative institutional agency was analysed by multiple perspectives around depopulation, welfare and services, and intermunicipal governance. The abundance of primary data, especially interviews with mayors and technical officers, allowed a grounded, systematic, experiential, and territorialised interpretation of the strategies, rationales, meanings, actions, and consequences of institutional agency in peripheral areas. Cartographic and infographic representations, (non-)participant observation, mapping, fieldnotes, and informal interactions further corroborated the interpretation of results.

In the first chapter, I identify such preconditions and barriers as evidence of transformational failures. I reconstruct their historical evolution for the Inner Area, and describe the consequences of these failures and the strategies implemented to address them. I then analyse municipal welfare provision and access to proximity services, mapping their uneven distribution in terms of presence, diversity, and distance, to interpret their impact on current and future habitability conditions. Building upon these high-resolution information, I then analyse municipal institutional capacity to influence or improve accessibility to several types of services. What emerges from the three chapters is a ‘withered agency’ of municipal institutions, derived both from the historical unfolding of uneven development processes (e.g., post-WWII de-industrialisation and privatisations), and from a ‘paradox of the local,’ where the institution closest to territorial specificities and communities is also the least powerful to influence policies and decisions taken at higher governance levels.

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INTRODUCTION

The transformative agency of municipal institutions in peripheral areas

It is not that our goal is some rigidly conceived “even development.” This would make little sense. Rather, the goal is to create socially determined patterns of differentiation and equalization which are driven not by the logic of capital but by genuine social choice. The hope is that in our efforts to step beyond the natural history of society and to produce real social history, we can avoid the complete obliteration of nature, and society and history with it. (Smith, 1984/2010, p. 211)

Geographically uneven development represents a wicked problem in local and regional development studies. It represents the aftermath of the 2008 global economic and financial crisis, globalisation, Brexit, while the environmental crisis and global changes in demographic structures and migration patterns have been worsening the impacts of uneven development processes (cf. Carrosio, 2019). The complexity inherent to geographically uneven development can appear at times overbearing, especially as the issue provides several opportunities for cross-fertilisations across disciplines, epistemologies and methods, and themes to focus on. Additionally, inequalities have continued to rise despite national and supranational policy efforts of strengthening territorial cohesion and subsidiarity (Fiorentino et al., 2024; MacKinnon et al., 2022). Uneven development is today more visible than ever in our everyday social practices, in policymaking, in the landscapes we live and go through, and even in the narratives and self-perception that we have internalised from the media and other discourses (Calignano, 2026).

The opening quote by Neil Smith therefore renews the importance and urgency of addressing uneven development and the reproduction of spatial inequalities. By opening the introduction of this PhD thesis with this quote, I also hope to emphasise the political significance of uneven development. I believe that places and communities affected by uneven development processes and outcomes can provide a learning opportunity to decouple local and regional development from the very same growth paradigm that led to uneven development and to its impacts on society and nature

(Leggero, 2024). Aspiring for a sustainable and just transition in marginalised, peripheral, ‘left-behind’ places requires us to acknowledge the critiques to the incumbent capitalist and neoliberal economic system, moving beyond the dualism of equalisation vs. specialisation and tailoring local and regional development policy to the effective empowerment and self-governance of its beneficiaries.

In the following PhD thesis, I study the uneven development outcomes of progressive peripheralization in Italian Inner Areas, especially in their impact on municipal institutions and on the accessibility to municipal welfare and proximity services. My analysis revolves around the role of municipal institutions, who represent pivotal actors to facilitate the emergence of new development paths in Inner Areas. With this research, I aim to contribute to the identification the material and immaterial barriers to institutional transformative agency, including the structural constraints and governance obstacles that prevent pathbreaking and path creation through the reinstating of welfare and service provision. Previous studies have in fact already discussed the relevance of institutions for regional development (e.g., MacKinnon et al., 2002; Gertler, 2010; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Syssner, 2016; Rodríguez-Pose & Ketterer, 2020), as well as the importance of welfare and service for local development in peripheral areas (e.g., Teneggi, 2021; Fontana & Servillo, 2024; Leggero, 2024; Lorenzetti, 2024; Royer et al., 2022; Papa et al., 2025). However, most evolutionary studies consist in retrospective, ex-post analyses that often focus on structural dynamics at the regional level, at the expense of micro-level analyses of agency that can provide constructivist and bottom-up insights centred around specific actors (Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018). In the following research, I adopt an agency perspective on municipal institutions, which allows access to micro-scale insights on the contextual (pre)conditions for both geographically uneven development processes, and for attempts to establish new development paths for transformative resilience. I specifically consider how mayors interpret, make sense of, react to, and tentatively modify these contextual conditions through the restructuring of local and regional institutions towards collective (inter-municipal) agency. I then apply these insights to the study of municipal welfare provision and proximity service accessibility.

The research also provided me the opportunity to explore methodological contributions to the study of peripherality and agency. First, the use of mixed methods integrates semi-structured interviews with georeferenced datasets on services and other municipal actors, also relying on (non-)participant observations and field mapping. Descriptive statistics on structural conditions of the peripheral area under study also served for contextualising uneven development on a specific socio-economic, cultural, spatial, and institutional contextual, and to ensure the representation of interview questions and the interpretation of results. Moreover, the use of Open Street Map also allowed to ensure as much as possible representativeness of current real-world conditions, thanks to constant updating of points of interest (also thanks to my own contributions to the database). Second, engaging mayors to access primary data allowed to

temporally shift agency towards present times and future developments, rather than relying on retrospective analyses. The historical reconstruction of uneven development processes inevitably entailed a comparison between past and present times. Still, in most of the research I focused on current determinants of and contextual (pre)conditions for transformative agency, which emerges as future-focused (Woods, 2023) and pragmatic — in the sense that it acknowledges the urgency of spatial inequalities, the paradoxes of current conditions of institutional agency, and the attempted strategies and consequences of actions and decisions at multiple governance levels.

After describing my positionality and contextualising the research under the ‘Dottorato Comunale’ PhD programme, in the following section I describe the conceptual framework adopted throughout the three chapters. Specifically, it largely draws from Economic Geography (EG) in its interpretation and analysis of geographically uneven development, to emphasise the need for a relational, agency-based, historical, and territorialised perspective to the regional development issues of peripherality and ‘left-behind places’. Adopting such agency perspective on peripherality, central in Evolutionary EG, the framework builds upon the regional innovation studies literature to work towards an operationalisation of institutional agency in Inner Areas, and its potential for facilitating the reconfiguration of municipal welfare and service provision.

1.1 Positionality and the Dottorato Comunale

I conducted the following PhD research within the Dottorato Comunale (Municipal PhD) programme established between GSSI and the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area municipalities. The Dottorato Comunale programme was established by the Italian Territorial Cohesion Agency in 2021, and consisted in a public tender to finance three cohorts of PhD candidates from 2021 to 2023 (Bando per dottorati comunali, 2021). In each academic year, the Agency devoted up to 25.000 € for each group of municipalities (at least four) within one of the 72 pilot Inner Areas identified by the Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne (SNAI), together with one University in their area or Region (or outside, if none were present). The aim of this experimental form of PhD programme was to support the “definition, implementation, study, and monitoring of local sustainable development strategies, and specifically the ecological and digital transition, the reduction of social and educational inequalities, the strengthening of local activities and of administrative capacity” (Bando per dottorati comunali, 2021, p. 4). Among the 40 ca. scholarships awarded to the first round of Municipal PhD students, GSSI participated with four municipalities within the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area: Molina Aterno (the *capofila*, representative), Castelvechio Calvisio, Fontecchio, and Gagliano Aterno. The case study, aspired impact, and policy relevance of my PhD research project had therefore been defined a priori by

the University and the Inner-Area municipalities — i.e., within the application to participate in the Municipal PhD public tender:

to identify the material and immaterial barriers to inclusion. [...] inclusion in access to essential services, educational inclusion, digital inclusion, inclusion in the economic-productive system, relational inclusion. [...] to analyse the current offer of essential services in the area, and evaluate if SNAI contributed to increase accessibility to these services” (GSSI communication on objectives and expected results, na)

In light of how my positionality as researcher was (pre)determined by my enrolment as PhD candidate in the Dottorato Comunale, I reflected on the extent to which “knowledge, facts, truths, and understandings” around the research topics and objectives changed throughout the years, as “social constructions marked by the continual processes of life as it has been lived” (Finley, 2008, p. 99) — i.e., how my approach to the research, including choices on epistemologies, methods, and theories to align with, co-evolved with my engagement with the study area, both within and outside structured fieldwork activities and by interacting with practitioners, mayors, residents, and researchers.

At the beginning of the PhD programme, I realised how the fuzziness that I perceived around the use of the word ‘inclusion’ —in the only guideline document outlining the expectations attached to the Municipal PhD form— led me to autonomously define the research methodology and data-accessing methods. Especially, I decided to analyse the role of municipal institutions as entry point towards local and regional development in peripheral areas. This choice also aligned and built upon my academic background and professional experiences.

Fieldwork activities, and the first primary data I accessed, inevitably contributed to influence my epistemological and methodological focus, and the contribution of my research to policy and practice. As further detailed in the first chapter of this dissertation, my first formal engagement with the four municipalities that participated to my Municipal PhD public tender consisted in unrecorded and unstructured interviews. During my first visit to one of these four municipalities, I also got acquainted to (or, was exposed to) the practitioner(s) working as community organiser(s). Moreover, mayors and practitioners suggested key policy documents and literature, such as the Inner Area Strategy document (drafted in 2014 as part of SNAI regional development policy), and the set of publications on Inner Areas, SNAI, and peripheral-marginalised municipalities, and related contemporary local and regional development policies implemented in Italy. In fact, I also started to learn about the covert dynamics and existing relationships among mayors, with all the positive and negative sides and delicate balances among political affiliations and ambivalent statuses. For example, the first phone-call interaction with one mayor consisted in apologising for having informally visited another mayor before them, and a confirmation or reassurance that I did not have any ‘favouritism’ or ‘special attention’ to some municipalities instead of others.

Beyond this and similar anecdotal accounts, the information emerged from these meetings and all future formal and informal interactions on the field, together with

fieldnotes, reflections, and photographic material, provided extremely valuable information and insights on my lived experience (Boylorn, 2008) of the fieldwork and the uneven development issue. For instance, one of these mayors stressed how my research had to be focused on the Inner Area as a whole, rather than on just the four municipalities participating to the scholarship. I treasured this suggestion, which turned out to be strategically relevant for preserving a ‘supralocal’ and super-partes engagement with the municipalities. Retrospectively, I believe it also served as a reminder how institutional agency manifests relational characteristics and collective dynamics that cannot be extracted nor deducted from their broader socio-cultural context:

It is possible to identify the core institutional entrepreneurs at different phases and detect master navigators, but it is just as important to acknowledge that they neither accomplished their ambitions alone nor quickly. [...] Actors collectively learnt new ways of thinking and constructed such new interpretations of themselves and the city that transformed cognitive-cultural institutions and in time, were also institutionalised regulatively and normatively that again shaped cognitive-cultural institutions. (Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018, p. 100)

I recognise that during the years I grew fonder of these villages, their long-standing, recent, or temporary residents, the ongoing projects and initiatives and the people organising and managing them. I became aware of my alignment with ‘city-quitting’ narrative, but the engagement with mayors, and the informal interactions with some enlightened practitioners, community organisers, and researchers, allowed me to develop a critical position towards idyllic, romanticised accounts of relocating to a small municipality and identifying as an ‘aspirant mountain dweller’. I never aimed at impartiality and objectivity in a positivist sense, and the adoption of an interpretive epistemology served the purpose of moving beyond methodologically positivist approaches (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006) in local and regional development policy. Nonetheless, I acknowledge to have internalised the potential of reversing the territorial stigma, brought about by uneven development processes, attached to peripheral places. As described by Calignano (2026), exposure to media, discourses, policy documents and narratives played a key role in developing the symbolism I today attach to small, peripheral, mountain villages — although these narrative often romanticise these context around nature, community, and sustainability. I believe ethnographic methods in one or more specific municipalities would have undoubtedly contributed to theorise grounded interpretations of peripherality, development, habitability, or ‘inclusion’. Therefore, all the (non-)participant observations, fieldnotes, and overbearing quantity of materials collected (postcards, flyers, brochures, pictures, fieldnote reflections) contributed through triangulation and heuristic inquiry to strive for an interpretation as grounded as possible to the places I engaged with, while maintaining a general overview on the whole Area.

1.2 Theoretical and conceptual framework

Peripheries have recently become a ubiquitous subject of inquiry among academics and policymakers, with research projects, special issues, workshops, and conferences contributing to raise the attention and interest on the topic (Pugh & Dubois, 2021). Dealing with the complexity inherent to the uneven development question calls for a trans-disciplinary approach to integrate existing contributions from sociology, innovation studies, political economy, and regional studies. In fact, all these disciplines have covered multiple specifications and manifestation of uneven development, as well as contributing to bring debates, critical perspectives, policy recommendations, and research agendas forward. The following section describe how the research builds upon, and aims supporting the integration of, the literature from (Evolutionary) Economic Geography and regional economic resilience, regional innovation systems and the (change) agency perspective, and the neo-institutionalist literature from political science and sociology.

Uneven development in the ‘left-behind’ discourse and in regional development policy

The labelling of places as ‘left-behind’, in its contemporary geographical connotation, originates from the 1970s in the United States, to represent spatially remote, non-urban areas with harsh living conditions of poverty and social exclusion (Pike et al., 2023). It first entered the policy discourses around education, social mobility and selective out-migration, to then take on the political significance of ‘discontent’ towards regional development policies that has insofar proved ineffective in reducing spatial inequalities within and among regions (Pike et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). The focus on discontent has however raised epistemological interest towards a specific outcome of uneven development: voting preferences and electoral outcomes, at different administrative scales, towards populist and anti-establishment parties. The picture behind its interpretation is in fact more nuanced, and carries a political positioning towards uneven development and the reproduction of spatial inequalities.

The first positioning consists in recalling that uneven development processes entail the peripheralization and marginalisation of places and people. Today, ‘left-behind’ places represent those peripheral areas (villages, cities, or regions) that have become marginalised in their social, economic, and institutional dimensions, due to the effects of uneven development processes. Rather than defining peripherality as a set of spatial, socio-economic, or living conditions, I recall how Niel Smith (1984/2010) interprets uneven development as the production of space through capitalist and neoliberal economic models:

One can see, for example, how geographers might treat uneven development as an ahistorical and universal process, little more than the inevitable result of the eternal impossibility of *even* development [...]. The point is that uneven development is the hallmark of the geography of

capitalism. It is not just that capitalism fails to develop unevenly [...]. The uneven development of capitalism is structural rather than statistical. [...] At the most basic level, [...] uneven development is the systematic geographical expression of the contradictions inherent in the very constitution and structure of capital. (Smith, 1984/2010, pp. 3–4, emphasis in original)

The second positioning concerns the lexicon and terminology used in policy and academia to describe peripheral places. It is necessary to reflect on and acknowledge that the discourse around ‘left-behindness’ and peripherality can carry negative and detrimental narratives, which are reinforced when places are labelled as incapable to react and adapt to declining regional development paths:

‘Left behind places’ [...] are deemed less worthy of support and allocation of scarce public resources due to their lack of potential, reinforcing their neglect. Formerly industrial, rural, and/or smaller cities and towns lack the attributes to benefit or agency and capacity to adapt and react to this shifting economic geography. [...] left behind places’ are positioned as passive residuals of metropolitan growth processes happening elsewhere. As such, ‘left behind places’ is distinctive in articulating a negative spatial imaginary of decline or stagnation. [...] Use of the term has created a powerful and resonant appellation and spatial imaginary of declining and marginal places. (Pike et al., 2023, p. 4)

Similarly, others have emphasised how such fatalistic and judgmental discourses are associated with a territorial stigmatisation of decline, lack of opportunities, pessimism, and other negative framings (Syssner, 2023). On the other hand, anchoring our language on the notion of uneven development allows to explicitly recall two fundamental tenets: that studies on the peripheralization of places originate from a longer history of thought, including the canonical core-periphery paradigm (Pugh & Dubois, 2021) and the tension between differentiation and equalisation (Smith, 1984/2010); and, that peripherality is a relational concept (Pezzi & Urso, 2016; Pike et al., 2023), according to which any peripheral place exists in relation to its centre(s). In fact, the very same notion of ‘centre’ or ‘periphery’ is a linguistic convention (Pezzi & Urso, 2016), up to the point that there will always be a ‘more central’ place with a specific, contextual trade-off between social, economic, institutional, and environmental conditions.

Based on these two arguments, and recalling the opening quote of this chapter, addressing the reproduction of uneven development processes becomes the overarching objective of future regional development policy. Addressing spatial inequalities and reinstating (rural) spatial justice (Hadjimichalis, 2011; Woods, 2023) in peripheral places hence consists in a reframing of development policy, which is also evident at the supralocal level. For instance, the European Commission’s ‘right to stay’ strategy (cf. Letta, 2024; von der Leyen, 2024) aims at supporting and empowering local actors in designing and implementing alternative forms of welfare provision, proximity service accessibility, employment opportunities, and housing availability, tailored to the needs and aspirations of their communities. Spatial justice therefore represents the directionality (Weber & Rohrer, 2012; Grillitsch et al., 2019; Uyarra et al., 2019) of an urgent and needed transitions for peripheral areas.

However, local and regional development policy has insofar fell short in providing appropriate policy responses to spatial inequalities, which have continued to rise, especially after the 2008 crisis and Covid-19 pandemic, both among and within regions (Council of Europe, 2021; Fiorentino et al., 2024). In the UK, for example, the slogan of ‘levelling up’ failed to address competing ideologies and political affiliations (Martin et al., 2021). While in Italy, the *Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne* (National Strategy for Inner Areas, SNAI), as well as the more recent National Recovery and Resilience Plan, failed to provide local public administrations with adequate human capital for designing and implementing local and regional development strategies (Barca, 2021; Carrosio et al., 2022). Authors from multiple disciplines have therefore contributed to debates and critical perspectives that distinguish between ‘traditional’ and place-based or place-sensitive (Iammarino et al., 2019) approaches to local and regional development policy. They also help to identify and contextualise failures of ‘business-as-usual’ strategies (i.e., growth-oriented, firm-centred, focused on technological innovation) and mainstream policymaking and funding allocation (Martin et al., 2021).

Among the several authors contributing to the debate, some have emphasised scepticism towards trickling-down innovation that fails to materialize at the local level (Alkemade et al., 2011; Pezzi & Urso, 2016; Tödtling & Trippl, 2018; Truffer et al., 2015; Weber & Rohrer, 2012). Others have warned against the reproduction of *metrophiliac* (Barbera & De Rossi, 2021) approaches to local and regional development that inherently rely on agglomeration economies to deliver effective results, irrespective of differences in non-urban, peripheral contexts. What then emerges in the regional innovation studies literature has been described as a ‘normative turn’ (Uyarra et al., 2019) that foregrounds ‘grand societal challenges’ such as climate change, ageing, environmental degradation, and poverty (Schot & Steinmueller, 2018; Grillitsch et al., 2019; Asheim et al., 2020; Isaksen et al., 2022).

In Economic Geography, some authors have emphasised that a more sustainable and just development path for peripheral areas ought to include needs-based principles based, for example on the foundational economy (Coenen & Morgan, 2020; MacKinnon et al., 2022), to prioritise community well-being and social infrastructures (Tomaney et al., 2024), and to build upon functional relations and polycentrism between peripheral-mountain areas and their closest urban-valley centres (Barbera & De Rossi, 2021; Carrosio, 2021; Compagnucci & Morettini, 2021; Servillo & Fontana, 2021). In the meantime, some evidence has already been collected that shows how past and ongoing experiments in peripheral areas are addressing uneven development processes (e.g., Sonzogno et al., 2022; Haartsen & Thissen, 2014; Tomeo & Pazzagli, 2024; Spadano, 2022; Ficola & Spadano, 2024).

Although limited a selection of ongoing debates and critiques, these contribution call for more sustainable and spatially just development paths in peripheral and marginalised areas, while emphasising the need for systemic changes that could construct

new spatial imaginaries, more place-sensitive policies and narratives, and improvements in living conditions.

*Transformative resilience in uneven development contexts:
towards a question of agency*

The called-for systemic transition in development paths I have described above is a central element of evolutionary approaches in Economic Geography: the concept of transformative resilience defines the capacity to react to, recover from, and adapt to crises, engage in new development paths, and facilitate radical changes in regional development structures — in the configuration of organisations and institutions, as well as in the rationale, value system, and *modus operandi* of regional development actors (Folke et al., 2010; Manca et al., 2017; Martin & Sunley, 2020; Trippl et al., 2024). The concept of transformative resilience hence seems particularly suited to deal with places affected by uneven development outcomes, as its specifications are particularly suited for places experiencing long-term process of progressive peripheralization (Tomaney et al., 2024).

Key implication of the transformative resilience concept is a shift in the unit of analysis, which explains the fittingness of the concept in uneven development context: from evaluating structural and economic indicators to identifying and analysing “the continually evolving *determinants*” (Martin & Sunley, 2020, pp. 18–19, emphasis in original) of resilience. As uneven development consists in a series of progressive peripheralization processes, peripherality is a historical condition that does not originate from a short-term, somewhat unexpected, and sudden shock or crisis. Rather, progressive peripheralization consists in slow-burns (Pendall et al., 2010). Although temporally protracted and without a clearly identifiable onset, it is still possible to identify some trends and phenomena, at multiple spatial and temporal scales, which constitute pre-conditions of an uneven development outcome at present days. For example, depopulation trends that unfolded in Italy after post-WWII urbanisation appears as a pre-condition for the current demographic structure, in turn leading to ageing and lack of intergenerational renewal as current peripherality conditions. Reinforcing this depopulation trend, changes in the economic structure of peripheral villages and cities (industrialisation that led to the hollowing out of agro-silvo-pastoral sectors; and deindustrialization and privatisations in larger cities, cf. Monterisi, 2022; Fulgenzi, 2026) represent an additional pre-condition to the current lack of employment opportunities and entrepreneurial culture.

The key temporal difference in the onset of uneven development processes also calls for a shift in how resilience is operationalised and empirically accessed. Analysing the determinants of resilience, its contextual conditions, and how these evolve in time, also questions the relevance of evaluating (if not measuring) transformative resilience through retrospective before-after comparisons, which often account for

solely economic outcomes, structural indicators, industrial dynamics, and measures of recovery. I therefore interpret uneven development and peripherality as the progressive erosion of transformative resilience determinants and contextual (pre)conditions, which hamper the capacity to engage in new path development. The epistemological consequence of researching transformative resilience in uneven development contexts hence leads to the question of whether and how a peripheral place managed to acquire and mobilise a set of determinants and (pre)conditions that, eventually, increased its capacity to facilitate pathbreaking and path creation.

Common to Economic Geography and innovation studies literature, transformative resilience and uneven development have both been approached from an agency perspective. Human agency has been defined as the “intentional, purposive and meaningful actions, and [their] intended and unintended consequences” (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020, p. 707), and it encompasses behavioural factors, self-organisation processes, and knowledge exchanges (Bristow & Healy, 2020). Recently, agency has been an increasingly researched topic in the literature (Voß et al., 2009; Pezzi & Urso, 2016; Bristow & Healy, 2020; Grillitsch et al., 2023; Hutchinson & Eversole, 2023; Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023b), especially when attempting to make sense of “uneven or unexpected regional development outcomes that cannot be explained by structural conditions or probabilities alone” (Dinmore et al., 2024, p. 1048). The agency perspective hence seems particularly relevant for researching transformative resilience in uneven development contexts, as it relates to whether and how the actions of regional development actors increase the capacity to facilitate new path development.

The transformative agency of institutions in uneven development

This question seems ever more relevant when considering how the literature interprets peripheral places in the agency perspective: these have been portrayed as suffering from a “loss of agency of social actors and institutions” (Pezzi & Urso, 2017, p. 3), or an “adaptive inertia, or failure to upgrade and modernise” (Martin & Sunley, 2020, p. 19). Such loss of agency has been elsewhere represented as the lack of adaptive capacity (Folke et al., 2010; Bristow & Healy, 2020; de Renzis et al., 2022), which is by definition “geographically differentiated” and related to “loosely and weakly connected social agents” (Pike et al., 2010, p. 9). In fact, Gernot Grabher already referred to pathological homeostasis when conceptualising the loss of the ability of a system to undergo internal restructuring, to “learning to learn and self-organise” (1993, p. 265). As adaptability entails a deeper, systemic restructuring and self-organisation, I interpret the loss of agency in uneven development contexts to the failure of facilitating spatial justice and sustainable transitions towards the ‘right to stay’. Agency in peripheral places is inherently transformative in nature (referred to as “change agency” by Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020), as it entails changes in meanings, values,

norms, issue frames, political positions and power relations, and organisational and institutional arrangements (Grabher, 1993; MacKinnon et al., 2009; Folke et al., 2010).

The intersections between uneven development, transformative resilience, and human agency therefore foreground behavioural and relational aspects, usually investigated in the interpretive and hermeneutic tradition (cf. Yanow, 2006): actors act beyond rationality, and their decisions are based on experience, perception, and frames of reference; and each actor interacts with others at different governance level (from municipal administrations to regional and national policymakers), and are embedded in a specific socio-cultural, economic, and institutional context. Behavioural and relational aspects contribute to studies on pathbreaking and path creation by providing detailed and contextual insights onto the directionality of agency, the motivation and rationales that guide actors' behaviour, and how different actors make sense of, problematise, and represent (Bacchi, 2009) the outcomes of uneven development. In fact, the radical and systemic change that defines transformative resilience seems to entail double-loop and (self-)reflexive learning processes that adjust or transform norms, behaviours, and objectives (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Grabher, 1993; Pahl-Wostl, 2009; Jessop, 2021). I therefore interpret transformative resilience more as a question of how actors develop their "ability to learn" (MacKinnon et al., 2009, p. 133) about how transformative agency is exercised — which its determinants and contextual (pre)conditions are, and what drives actors' decisions and agendas.

The literature operationalises transformative agency as embedded in three types of regional development (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). One is entrepreneurs ("innovative entrepreneurship"), building upon Schumpeterian notions of innovations, which can trigger momentum for pathbreaking and produce impacts beyond the simple establishment of a (new) firm. The other is institutions ("institutional entrepreneurship", cf. Bathelt & Glückler, 2014), interpreted as the precondition for innovative entrepreneurship and instrumental for its diffusion and growth. The third is individuals representing "place-based leadership", defined as the alignment, mobilisation, and combination of resources, power, and competencies by specific individuals. Transformative agency hence results from the combined action of these three types of agents, and lack or ineffectiveness of one of them constitutes per se an obstacle to transformative agency (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). It is important to point out that the agency of each of these three actors can also depend on their respective position and organisation:

organizations can be approached as institutionalized structures that by themselves do not produce intentional, purposive and meaningful actions – human individuals do. While we hope for a true micro-level perspective, this does not rule out organizational agency. Organizational routines and resources as well as enacted functions and goals imply that individuals occupying certain positions need to be seen in their respective organizational contexts. Organizations operate as legal entities and, as such, produce actions that affect regional growth paths (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020, p. 709).

An effective capacity to facilitate new development paths hence depends on both individual and collective action, and that actors affect regional development paths through the restructuring or creation of new organisational settings, actor coalitions, and institutions (Battilana et al., 2009; Moyson et al., 2017; Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018; Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020).

Among the three actors of change agency described by Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020), the role of institutions emerges as particularly relevant for pathbreaking and path creation in uneven development contexts. While the relevance of institutions in regional development is undisputed across disciplines (e.g., MacKinnon et al., 2002; Gertler, 2010; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Syssner, 2016; Rodríguez-Pose & Ketterer, 2020), the main problem with this actor in economic geography is they have usually been treated as a black box, operationalised in vague and inconsistent or conflicting terms (MacKinnon et al., 2009; Bathelt & Glückler, 2014; Zukauskaitė et al., 2017). Institutions have been canonically interpreted as context-specific regulations, laws, values, and norms, which shape the functioning of economic systems and social action (North, 1990; Amin & Thrift, 1994; Lowndes, 1996; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Zukauskaitė et al., 2017). I however acknowledge that uneven development and transformative agency call for a different positioning on the interpretation and operationalisation of institutions. Institutional economic geography has also criticised a reductionist interpretation of institution, based on rational-behaviour assumptions, which neglects informal dynamics, habits, and the influence of institutions on individuals' behaviours and aspirations (MacKinnon et al., 2009). Others have called for a more relational and pluralist perspective on the role of institutions, to bridge and integrate the evolutionary and institutionalist branches of the literature with studies on regional innovation and regional development (cf. MacKinnon et al., 2009; Bathelt & Glückler, 2014; Zukauskaitė et al., 2017).

On the other hand, I align with the neo-institutionalist perspective from political science and sociology, according to which socio-economic, cultural, and political factors influence human agency beyond utility-maximisation and rational choice models (Koelble, 1995; Lowndes, 1996). What distinguishes the new institutionalist perspective from previous ones is the discarding of the concept of rationality, entailing that the construction of new institutional arrangements is isomorphic (Powell and Di Maggio, 1991, in Koelble, 1995): it occurs as a result of the cultural, structural, and political embeddedness of actors and their organisational representations of institutions (Granovetter, 1992, in Koelble, 1995, and Lowndes, 1996), and it unfolds through reflexive interaction in specific places and times (Bathelt & Glückler, 2014). In the following section, I describe how I operationalised such reframing of institutions, and how the conceptual framework discussed insofar determined the methodology employed throughout the PhD research. I then describe how, in light of the resulting research question and objective, primary and secondary data have been accessed.

1.3 Methodological overview

Within the context of uneven development and peripherality, transformative resilience also affects the institutional arrangements of a specific place in time. I therefore interpret transformative agency among institutions in uneven development contexts as expressing the duality of institutional change: as socially-constructed entities, institutions are represented by actors that deliberately attempt to change existing or establish new institutions; meanwhile, institutions co-evolve with organisations (Zukauskaite et al., 2017) by steering the agency of these actors towards cultural, socio-economic, normative, and value-driven preferences and frames, which are mobilised to legitimise incumbent or new institutions. I adopt a constructivist and interpretative approach to analyse transformative agency among institutions in uneven development contexts, to foreground the behavioural and relational dynamics that unfold at the micro level. The latter has largely been overlooked in studies on agency (Bathelt & Glückler, 2014; Nilsen et al., 2022; Hutchinson & Eversole, 2023; Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023a), but it remains crucial a scale to interpretatively draw meaning from social practices, actions, behaviours, languages and objects as these express meanings, beliefs, traditions, norms, and narratives (Yanow, 2000; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

Based on the hermeneutic tradition in the social sciences, interpretation of these elements then allows to understand and analyse the sensemaking rationales of institutional actors —i.e., of the organisational forms of institutional arrangements in uneven development contexts. In the present PhD research I therefore aim at analysing how institutions interpret and make sense of peripherality; how uneven development processes and outcomes are framed, and how these contribute to the construction of narratives around both peripherality and transformative resilience; and how institutions legitimise local and regional development policy and other specific actions and strategies implemented at the local level (cf. Bacchi, 2009; Grillitsch & Rekers, 2016; Bristow & Healy, 2020; Nilsen et al., 2022; Roessler, 2024; Fulgenzi, 2026). The main research question driving the PhD research can therefore be formulated as: which role do institutions embody in transformation processes affecting uneven development contexts? Based this question, I further ask which are the characteristics of transformative institutional agency in uneven development: which meanings, values, and narratives drive their actions; how their agency co-evolves with structural conditions of peripherality; and how they negotiate and re-organise their position around peripherality and transformative resilience to account for their ‘withered’ agency.

I employ mixed methods to integrate as much as possible secondary data to primary ones on the lived experiences (Boylorn, 2008) of the actors that constitute organisational representations of institutions in uneven development contexts. When developing the workflow to access and analyse data, I referred to grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Bryant & Charmaz, 2008) to avoid as much as possible deductive interpretations on the nature and implications of peripherality, uneven development,

transformative agency and transformative resilience. Primary data are therefore accessed at the lowest spatial scale and governance level, which in this case corresponds to municipal public administrations.

The relevance of the role of these actors is not trivial and has been previously discussed in existing research, showing how municipal actors in peripheral managed to mobilise resources and agendas to promote new development paths. Community co-operatives and enterprises are an example of these, as they represent a local development opportunity for local residents by providing employment opportunities, mobilising local resources, people, know-how and competences (Pezzi & Urso, 2018; Teneggi, 2018/2020; Spalazzi & Curciarello, 2023; Sforzi et al., 2024). Besides this form of entrepreneurial transformative agency, other cases directly involve institutional entrepreneurship: for example, the reconfiguration of welfare and service provision led to the remunicipalisation of services, their upscaling at the intermunicipal level, or to a reorganisation of their provision together with community-based organisations (Ahlbrandt & Sumka, 1983; Percy, 1984; Joshi & Moore, 2004; Halmer & Hauenschild, 2014; Compagnucci & Morettini, 2020; Mastronardi & Romagnoli, 2020; Cumbers & Paul, 2022; Kuhlmann et al., 2022; Méndez Juez, 2022).

After collecting secondary data from policy documents (most importantly, the Area Strategy and the National Strategy for Inner Areas), I conducted a first informal round of meetings with the mayors of the four municipalities participating to the Dottorato Comunale research project. During these and other informal visits to municipalities in the Inner Area, I collected fieldnotes and photographic material that was later used for triangulation purposes. This phase hence provided grounded insights and “informed hunches” (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. xvi) on a geographical area I had only started to familiarise with. Additional secondary data at the local administrative unit level on demographics, economic activities, orography, institutional capacity (e.g., age of mayors and staff and dimensions of the municipal government office), and administrative geographies (e.g., membership in the CAs, Local Action Group, Homogeneous Reconstruction Area, having the area been significantly affected by the 2009-earthquake) have been then collected to gain an overview of the current peripherality conditions of all municipalities.

1.4 Case study: The Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area

The research is based on a case study design applied to the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area in the Abruzzo Region (Italy). It is one of the 72 pilot areas identified by the SNAI policy in 2014, and it currently includes 29 municipalities.^[1] The Area presents important characteristics of peripherality at multiple dimensions. It is one of the largest Inner Areas in the Region, with almost 700 km² and a population density of 17.5 residents/km² — against a Regional and national average of 67.3 and

75.7, respectively. Among its residents, 60% live in a municipality classified as peripheral or ultra-peripheral, and only 38% are aged 0-14 (11.5%) or 65+ (26.6%). All municipalities suffered from a severe and protracted depopulation trend, averaging at 72% since the first official national census of 1861, with some municipalities losing up to 97% of their residents. Worsening the demographic change scenario, all municipalities present a negative natural balance averaging at -5 residents in the period 2001-2025. Among the 29 in the Inner Area, 20 have witnessed a positive net migration rate, but for only 5 of them this trend compensated the negative natural balance.

Looking at the demographic trend (number of residents) for the municipalities in the Inner Area, it is possible to identify two main periods of heightened outmigration. The first is evident in the 1911 national census, mainly due to a shift in the dominant economic model that phased out the feudal agricultural economy (De Nardis, 1994). During the interwar period, outmigration seemed to slow down, as land ownership provided employment and self-subsistence opportunities related to the agro-silvo-pastoral economic system of small urban settlements in the mountains and valleys (Fulgenzi, 2026). The second outmigration period is identifiable with the results of the 1951 (and following) census data, corresponding with an urbanisation phase that concentrated employment opportunities in the industrial districts of the two main larger and closest cities of L'Aquila and Sulmona. However, closure of these very same industrial districts renewed the slow-burn of demographic decline, as residents moved to other larger cities within the Region (e.g., Pescara) and outside of it. Looking at more recent demographic data, it is interesting to notice how municipalities closer to L'Aquila (classified as 'belt' in the SNAI system) were the only ones that managed to retain residents after 1991, and even saw an increase in number of residents since 2001. Nonetheless, the Inner Area accounts for around 13,000 residents, with only three municipalities hosting more than 1,000 inhabitants (S. Demetrio ne' Vestini, 1981; Barisciano, 1638; Poggio Picenze, 1023); and a median of 316 residents for all municipalities; and four villages with 100 ca. inhabitants or less. Additionally, their demographic structure presents a high structural dependency rate, with an average of 77% of residents aged 14 and less or 65+ for all municipalities in 2022 — only 7 municipalities registered new births between 2014 and 2022.

It is also important to recall that, when the Area Strategy for local and regional development of the Inner Area was drafted, the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana was the only Inner Area in the Region without an established *Unione di Comuni* (Combined Authority, CA) — while around 20% of municipalities in the Region, and 45% in Italy, belong to one. At the start of the research, the mayors of these municipalities were in the middle of negotiating the establishment of two CAs, which are today operational as “*Unione Comuni Sirentina*” in the southern half of the Inner Area, and “*Montagna Aquilana*” in the Northern half. In fact, the latter includes 30 municipalities in total, with only 18 of them included in the Inner Area perimeter — the

remaining located around the Regional capital of L'Aquila. The first consists of 10 municipalities, all of which within the Inner Area.

To address peripheralization and support local and regional development, an Area Strategy was drafted in 2016 following a series of focus groups, meetings, roundtables, conferences, and other events engaging mayors, school principals and teachers, healthcare directors, civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations, and other types of stakeholders specifically related to public transport, entrepreneurs, producers, artisans, tourism, and local governance (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2020). The very first focus group took place in 2014 in the municipality of Fontecchio, where several stakeholders met with the at-the-time Minister for Territorial Cohesion Fabrizio Barca. The Area Strategy draft was then presented, updated, revised, and discussed in 17 public meetings, each focused on a specific theme to be improved by the Strategy — community organisations, public transport and mobility services, education services, healthcare services, employment, and technical assistance and guidance on how to access European funds (i.e., ESF). Based on the Area Strategy document, a total of 7.52 million € was allocated to local and regional development, of which 45% was dedicated to restoring access to and improving the provision of public transport, education, and healthcare services (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2020).

In more recent years, some municipalities have started experimenting with projects and initiatives aiming at reinstating satisfactory habitability conditions to attract new residents and provide opportunities to stay for current ones. Some 'most notable' cases have gained public attention in local and national media and academia, as well as an international recognition of the significance of projects and initiatives conducted.

1.5 Structure, contents, and data

The thesis structure reflects the three research articles as they were developed through the Dottorato Comunale programme. The first chapter serves a twofold purpose. First, it describes the main conceptual framework applied throughout the PhD programme, by considering the contemporary academic and policy debate around left-behind places, its contextualisation around uneven development and transformative resilience, and the potential and epistemological implications of addressing progressive peripheralization and the 'withered' agency of municipal institutions. Second, it identifies the material and immaterial barriers to institutional transformative agency, and how these hamper pathbreaking and path creation. Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were then carried out with 27 mayors of the Inner Area municipalities and 5 technical officers, analysed through the computer-aided qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, and coded by integrating an inductive and deductive approach: a first set of categories was created to identify explicit references to theoretical

arguments, while additional sub-categories were created *in vivo* following open coding (Kuckartz, 2014). I also referred to selective coding to rearrange, rename, and sometimes consolidate sub-categories; and to axial coding to identify storylines, arguments, normative positionings and framings (Ginger, 2006). I then interpreted these primary data as the contextual and intervening (pre)conditions, strategies, and consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) of peripherality and uneven development.

The second chapter focuses on municipal welfare and service accessibility as pivotal contextual condition for new path development in Inner Areas. It provides a detailed analysis on the presence, diversity, and distance of services of general interest (SGIs) for each municipality. The resulting uneven distribution of SGIs allows to identify different ways of improving accessibility to different service types/sectors, as well as to map municipalities that represent ‘centralities’ in terms of presence and/or diversity of proximity services. The article relies entirely on open-source secondary data and tools, integrated with fieldwork observations: the Open Street Map (OMS) (openstreetmap.org) community-based map; the Overpass Turbo (overpass-turbo.eu) service, to retrieve points of interest (POIs) that represent services of general interest (SGIs); and the Open Source Routing Machine (project-osrm.org) to compute travel times from each Inner-Area municipality to POIs. The list of POIs was based on existing literature on the significance of proximity services for peripheral and inner-mountain areas (e.g., Vendemmia & Lanza, 2022; Lorenzetti & Leggero, 2024), as well as on interview data from the first research article. Based on OMS definitions and categorisations, a system of tags and keys was created and successively refined, rearranged, and consolidated to include as many proximity services as possible. The first-hand experience of having already spent 2-3 years conducting fieldwork, and attending events and initiatives throughout the Inner Area, provided the critical insight of realising many POIs in the OMS database were either missing or outdated (last edited more than 4-5 years ago). I therefore personally updated and added more than 350 POIs, from adding information on opening times and services offered to mapping the opening of new activities or the closure of existing one. The mapping of POIs in the Inner Area municipalities, as well as in L’Aquila and its surroundings, hence turned out to be an ongoing representativeness effort, to access the current situation of services, economic activities, and amenities, with their related information.

The third article builds upon the results of the second, and focuses on the capacity of municipal institutions in the Inner Area to facilitate municipal welfare provision and proximity service accessibility. It engages with a sample of mayors in the case study area to comment on the infographic and cartographic representations of SGIs accessibility; to then analyse the ‘withered’ agency of municipal institutions in terms of the difference between their perceived importance of different types of services and their capacity to actually facilitate their accessibility. We integrated OSM data with secondary ones from official national registries for civil society organisations and co-operatives, and from the Orbis database on firms and entrepreneurs. We mapped the

presence of these three type of actors in the Inner Area municipalities, as well as in those inscribed in the 30-minute driving isochrone. We then analysed their distribution across municipalities, their presence relative to the number of residents, and categorised the proximity service they represent (following the system developed in the second research article) based on their activity and function. To then compare this overview of actor composition with grounded perspectives on proximity service accessibility, multi-actor cooperation for municipal welfare, and municipalities' capacity to facilitate welfare provision, we identified the municipalities with the highest number of actors per resident. I interviewed the 10 municipalities that emerged, in a semi-structured format including one prioritisation exercise on the obstacles to accessibility, and one mapping exercise on the priority of service categories and the perceived capacity to influence their accessibility.

The final conclusions chapter sums up the main findings of the whole research project, and delineates implications for academia, policy, and practice. Specifically, it describes how municipal institutions hold a disputed role in local and regional development policy for Inner and peripheral areas: on the one hand, they embody a sense of responsibility towards the public interest and wellbeing of their community; on the other, this expectation is not upheld by actual empowerment and capacity building policies in the long term. Higher-level regional development policy for peripheral areas, at least in Italy, also does not seem to offer particularly welcoming or optimistic approaches to the future of peripheral areas. I argue that existing actor coalitions and networks, who provide and experiment with alternatives to fatalism and decline, should recontextualise on the ground the "relations between the technical-political perspectives and the local ones, and [their] material effects" (Sabatini, 2024, p. 85). Limitations and future research opportunities are also described, especially concerning opportunities for replicability and scalability of the research.

Endnotes

[1] During the programming period 2014-2020, SNAI included in the Inner Area perimeter 24 municipalities, which then increased to 28 in the following period 2021-2027. In 2025, the SNAI policy was renewed as PSNAI (Strategic National Plan for Inner Areas) with a redrawing of Inner Area perimeters. Some regions, among which Abruzzo, asked to include other municipalities previously not under the Inner Area perimeter: this led to adding Barisciano (1.638 residents, 940 m a.s.l.) as 29th municipality in the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area (cf. Dipartimento per le Politiche di Coesione, 2025).

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CHAPTER 1

‘If not institutions, who?’ Institutional agency in Inner Areas to address transformational failures¹

Andrea Fulgenzi

Abstract

Regional development policy for peripheral and ‘left-behind’ places has had limited success in addressing geographically uneven development patterns. The onset of adaptive inertia and slow-burn pressures sparks uncertainty around the determinants of transformative regional resilience, as well as on the role of specific regional development actors. Institutions and their organisational forms are crucial for addressing material and immaterial obstacles to transformative agency. In fact, a complex interplay of structural, cognitive and organisational challenges curbs institutional agency, leading to the reproduction of transformational failures and adaptive inertia. By accessing primary data on institutional agency among municipal administration in an Italian Inner Area, the article recontextualises transformational failures from an agency perspective on transformative regional resilience. The qualitative analysis of interviews with mayors from Inner-Area municipalities allowed the identification of determinants and contextual (pre)conditions of adaptive inertia, describing how institutional agency is yet hampered by structural obstacles, weak collective agency and cognitive lock-ins. Analysing municipal administrations unveiled existing framings and (tentative) reframings of peripherality, ongoing strategies and their expected consequences for local and regional development, emphasising how collective, self-governed and intermunicipal forms of institutional agency could facilitate transformative resilience.

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Keywords

Inner Areas – Institutional entrepreneurship – Regional development – Left-behind places – Transformative regional resilience – Change agency

1. Introduction

Regional development in ‘left-behind places’ has gained increasing attention in research and policy (Martin et al., 2021; Pugh & Dubois, 2021; OECD, 2022; Pike et al., 2023). Attempts to address geographically uneven development (Smith, 2010) are situated amidst lively debates and critical perspectives, engaging researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners in exploring its complex, ambiguous, multi-dimensional, and spatially-diverse nature. Past regional development policy resulted ineffective in reducing spatial inequalities, which continue to rise especially in the current context of geopolitical conflicts and environmental degradation (Alkemade et al., 2011; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Asheim et al., 2020; OECD, 2025). Common characteristics of non-metropolitan, peripheral areas in Italy, Spain, France, Germany, The Netherlands, and the US include depopulation and ageing, scarcity of employment opportunities, de-industrialisation processes, spatial distance to essential services, and a general feeling of discontent towards higher-level decisionmakers and policies (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Martin et al., 2021; Pike et al., 2023; Woods, 2023; Tomaney et al., 2024). Despite the renewed policy interest, mainstream regional development policy is still “metro-philiac” (Barbera & De Rossi, 2021) and transition-oriented agendas promoting systemic changes often struggle to eventually replace ‘business-as-usual’ practices (Weber & Rohrer, 2012).

It is still unclear how, against all odds, some peripheral places managed to acquire the capacity of engaging with processes of pathbreaking (Storti et al., 2023) and path creation. Recent literature has explored an agency perspective on regional economic resilience, which allows to examine the intentional behaviour of actors that (managed to) facilitate new development paths (Bristow & Healy, 2020; Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). In this perspective, progressive peripheralization leads to “adaptive inertia” (Martin & Sunley, 2020, p. 19), or a “loss of agency” (Pezzi & Urso, 2017, p. 3), defined as the reproduction of lock-ins due to limited or ineffective capacity to adapt and change behaviour. Investigating adaptive inertia hence allows to analyse the contextual conditions that promote or hamper transformative resilience (Martin & Sunley, 2020), here defined as deeper, systemic change towards more liveable, spatially-just, and sustainable places (cf. Boyd & Folke, 2012; Spadano, 2024). Among these, institutions are crucial not only as ‘enablers’ of innovation but as a dimension that co-evolves with individuals and organisations (Battilana et al., 2009; Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018a; Gerber et al., 2020; Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). The role of institutions in the regional resilience literature is however still problematic and open to debate. Institutions

are met with ambiguity and vagueness, as either the measurement of ‘institutional quality’ as a structural dependent variable, or as barriers to change due to their risk-aversion, inertia, and incremental rather than systemic evolution (Levinthal & March, 1993; Dewulf et al., 2005; Syssner & Jonsson, 2020; Urso, 2021; Isaksen et al., 2022).

The article instead describes how the institutional dimension of transformative agency is crucial for the development and transformative resilience of peripheral places characterised by adaptive inertia. Institutions emerge as key determinants and contextual (pre)conditions to address a wide set of material and immaterial challenges that reproduce lock-ins and failures — especially given their political mandate and administrative functions related to territorial development, and their capacity to engage with learning processes that can strengthen their transformative agency. A key question is therefore which these challenges and failures are, and how institutions in peripheral areas engage and co-evolve with regional development actors. Adopting a constructivist case study in the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area in the Abruzzo Region, primary data granted access to the perspectives and experiences of Mayors and technical officers from Inner-Area municipalities. Obstacles to the institutional dimension of transformative agency are identified and assessed using the framework of transformational failures (Weber & Rohrer, 2012), and they provide important information on how intermunicipalism could allow municipal public administrations in the Inner Area to strengthen their transformative agency. The following sections describe the conceptual framework that draws from economic geography, agency, and institutional theory, to then present the epistemic strategy of adopting the transformational failures framework. The research design and case study follow, with further details on the historical unfolding of uneven development in the Inner Area available in Annex 3. Results are presented following the analytical framework of transformational failures, to then discuss their relevance for the agency literature and potential directions for future research on regional economic resilience, institutional transformative agency, and peripherality.

2. Situating peripherality within transformative agency

The article is built upon a transdisciplinary conceptual framework integrating concepts from economic geography, the agency perspective on regional resilience (Bristow & Healy, 2020), and (neo)institutional theory (Gerber et al., 2020; Koelble, 1995; Lowndes, 1996), to explore how the co-evolution of institutions and individual or organisational actors can facilitate transformative change. As represented in Table 1.1, these strands of literature provide similar understandings of what constitutes a lock-in in peripheral places, of identified development pathways, and which processes can facilitate pathbreaking and the creation of new development pathways. The first element of the framework interprets the transformative nature of local and regional development for peripheral areas as the capacity to address adaptive inertia. The second

step draws from innovation studies to understand which and how some actors exercise transformative agency to intentionally facilitate pathbreaking and path creation processes. The third step argues institutions to play a determinant role for the emergence and patterning of these processes, especially as adaptive inertia becomes manifest as a wide set of material and immaterial barriers that hamper transformative agency.

2.1 From left-behindness to transformative ability

In the United States and European Union, places labelled as 'left-behind' have been positioned on the losing side of global changes in economic, technological, and environmental conditions. Processes of industrial privatisations, urbanisation waves after the Second World War (WWII), globalisation, and post-2008 austerity measures led to increasing spatial inequalities both among and within regions (Martin et al., 2021; Pezzi & Urso, 2016; Pike et al., 2023). The concept of 'left-behindness' today has generally been applied to peripheral places and regions affected by geographically uneven development (Smith, 2010) outcomes, such as ageing population, outmigration, and scarce or lacking employment and/or education opportunities.

Despite the increasing academic and policy interest to the issue, existing and past strategies and agendas attempting to halt or 'revert' uneven development have been criticised as ineffective or deemed too vague, utopian or naïve, and lacking integration with the business-as-usual scenario (Martin et al., 2021; Weber & Rohrer, 2012). Several authors have pointed to the failure of focusing policy intervention on trickling-down technological innovation (Alkemade et al., 2011; Pezzi & Urso, 2016; Tödtling & Trippel, 2018; Truffer et al., 2015; Weber & Rohrer, 2012), and to the reproduction of metrophilia (Barbera & De Rossi, 2021, p. 11) approaches based on agglomeration economies. While a place-sensitive perspective has been proposed to bridge mainstream and more radical strategies and integrate people- and place-based approaches (Iammarino et al., 2019), scepticism remains on the potentially ambiguous, unforeseen, or undesirable impacts of "transformative actions [...] affecting services and local development projects" (Sabatini & Mariani, 2021, p. 156). The bottom line of this ongoing debate is that peripheral places offer new spaces and opportunities to facilitate radical and systemic reconfigurations of local and regional development structures. Regional development policy also called for a "transformative shift in policy model and resource commitment" (Martin et al., 2021, p. 109).

The reframing could potentially align with normative (Uyarra et al., 2019) and "needs-based" (MacKinnon et al., 2022, p. 52) policy goals of increasing (rural) spatial justice (Woods, 2023) and reinstating alternative or municipal forms of welfare (Lorenzetti, 2024) tailored to the needs of local communities. Some recent studies have in fact provided evidence for alternative local and regional development strategies. For example, to capitalise on functional relations and polycentrism, although usually requiring the relative proximity of a metropolitan centre (Barbera & De Rossi,

2021; Carrosio, 2021; Coenen & Morgan, 2020; Compagnucci & Morettini, 2021); or to challenge assumptions of brain-drain, fixity, and backwardness, highlighting the willingness to stay or return to peripheral areas, their higher quality of life, and the potential to experiment with social innovation around habitability, work, retro-innovation, and the energy transition (e.g., Sonzogno et al., 2022; Haartsen & Thissen, 2014; Tomeo & Pazzagli, 2024; Spadano, 2022; Ficola & Spadano, 2024).

2.2 Dealing with adaptive inertia through transformative agency

Common characteristic of peripheral places is the reproduction of negative hysteretic responses to slow-burn (Pendall et al., 2010) and cumulative (Tomaney et al., 2024) uneven development processes rather than sudden shocks. The distinction calls for a fundamental shift in research and practice: from evaluating regional resilience against before-and-after comparisons of economic outcomes and structural indicators (Bristow & Healy, 2020); to investigating resilience the “continually evolving determinants” (Martin & Sunley, 2020, pp. 18–19, emphasis in original) of radical and systemic changes towards an improved status quo. Transformative resilience is defined as the capacity of regions to recover from and adapt to crises and engage in new development trajectories, by promoting deeper systemic change, learning, and reconfigurations of organisations and institutions, and it is therefore more concerned with long-term processes of capacity-building and learning (Folke et al., 2010; Manca et al., 2017; Martin & Sunley, 2020; Trippl et al., 2024). Peripheral places are hence characterised by “adaptive inertia, or failure to upgrade and modernise” (Martin & Sunley, 2020, p. 19), which represents the lack of adaptive capacity (Folke et al., 2010; Bristow & Healy, 2020; de Renzis et al., 2022), or pathological homeostasis (Grabher, 1993). Adaptive inertia emerges as a twofold lock-in, which introduces a second important distinction between failing to adapt to declining development paths, due to ineffective agendas or interventions, and failing to reflexively learn how to improve transformative capacity (Weiss, 1998, in Duit, 2012; Martin & Sunley, 2020; Trippl et al., 2024). The question behind transformative resilience in contexts of adaptive inertia could then be rephrased as where, how, and when certain places learned how to facilitate and govern the process of react, adapt, and transform despite cumulative uneven development — the “uneven or unexpected regional development outcomes that cannot be explained by structural conditions or probabilities alone” (Dinmore et al., 2024, p. 1048).

Recent literature from innovation studies has increasingly applied an agency perspective on regional resilience (Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023). Agency is defined as the “intentional, purposive and meaningful actions” of specific actors or individuals, with related “intended and unintended consequences” (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020, p. 707). It specifically analyses human agency, self-organisation processes, non-linear dynamics, and the role of firm and non-firm actors as determinants and micro-dimensions of resilience (Bristow & Healy, 2020; Martin & Sunley, 2020). Grillitsch and

Sotarauta (2020) explore the concept of transformative agency, defined as actions that intentionally aim at supporting pathbreaking and path-creation processes for systemic change and learning — in other words, the exercise of transformative capacity. The authors argue transformative agency is embedded in three dimensions, first of which is innovative entrepreneurship of firm actors. The second is institutional entrepreneurship, exercised by individuals, organisations, and groups thereof, who facilitate path-breaking and path creation through formal and informal institutions, and can also aim at evolving existing or creating new institutions (Battilana et al., 2009). The third is place-based leadership, which can also overlap with the entrepreneurial or institutional dimensions (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020).

Although these three are strongly interrelated, the (evolutionary) economic geography literature has mostly focused on innovative entrepreneurship and the role of firms and technological innovation as enabling or facilitating regional economic resilience, leaving the institutional dimension relatively underrepresented (Gertler, 2010; Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018a; MacKinnon et al., 2019; Bristow & Healy, 2020) and still complex and ambiguous to operationalise and empirically investigate (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013).

2.3 The role of institutions in transformative agency

It is necessary to first define how the article situates institutions. The general interpretation of institutions as ‘rules of the game’ defines them as the set of formal regulations, laws, as well as informal values and norms that shape economic activity and social action within a specific organisation or community (Lowndes, 1996; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Zukauskaitė et al., 2017). The role of institutions in regional development is “undeniably pervasive” (Gertler, 2010, p. 2) and critical for transformative resilience and the creation of new development paths (MacKinnon et al., 2002; Gertler, 2010; Boyd & Folke, 2012; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Syssner, 2016; Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018b; Asheim et al., 2020; Coenen & Morgan, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose & Ketterer, 2020; Isaksen et al., 2022). The general consensus is that, when interacting with firms, industries, or technological innovations, specific institutions support economic growth better than others (Bristow & Healy, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). To analyse their role in transformative resilience however, it is not sufficient to ascertain the ‘quality’ or ‘effectiveness’ of institutions from their impact on regional economic structures. This approach risks reducing transformative resilience to the achievement of economic outcomes or structural conditions, such as technological innovation and industrial restructuring (Bristow & Healy, 2020). It would overlook how actors intentionally and collectively exercise their agency to influence and change institutions (Battilana et al., 2009), as well as how institutions engage with formal and informal processes of double-loop learning (Grabher, 1993), self-reflexive learning and reflexive governance (Jessop, 2021), and in the evolution or creation of new institutions (Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018b; Moyson et al., 2017; Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). These cognitive and political dimensions are crucial in

Table 1.1: Overview of the conceptual framework of the institutional agency in peripheral places.

Theoretical concept	Lock-in	Development pathway	Pathbreaking and path-creation
Agency perspective on regional economic resilience.	Misaligned, isolated, ineffective, or harmful behaviours and agendas of actors and their collective organisational representations.	Emergence and patterning of human agency; balancing of actor composition and their power relations.	Mobilisation of entrepreneurial and/or institutional actors, and of place-based leadership.
Transformative resilience of peripheral and “left-behind” regions.	Adaptive inertia, loss of agency, lack of adaptive/adaptability capacity.	Addressing slow burns pressures and cumulative peripheralization processes.	Identification of contextual (pre)conditions to and determinants of resilience.
Policy learning and multilevel governance.	Cognitive and organisational challenges to reflexive learning, self-governance, and meta-governance.	Capacity to deliver better regional development policies and institutional arrangements.	Acquisition, translation, dissemination of knowledge; reflexive, double-loop learning.

Table 1.2: Transformational failures and their mechanisms. Adapted from Weber and Rohrer, 2012. Complete overview of the framework including market and structural-system failures is provided in Annex 1.

Transformational failures	Failure mechanisms
Directionality	Lack of shared vision on transition goal and direction; Inability of collective coordination of actors involved in shaping systemic change; Insufficient regulation or standards to guide and consolidate the direction of change; Lack of targeted funding for research, development and demonstration projects and infrastructures to establish corridors of acceptable development paths.
Demand articulation	Insufficient spaces for anticipating and learning about user needs to enable the uptake of innovations by users; Absence of orienting and stimulating signals from public demand, lack of demand-articulating competencies.
Policy coordination	Lack of multi-level policy coordination across governance levels or between technological and sectoral systems; Lack of horizontal coordination between research, technology and innovation policies, and sectoral policies (e.g., transport, energy, agriculture); Lack of vertical coordination between ministries and implementing agencies; No coherence between public policies and private sector institutions; No temporal coordination (mismatches in timing of interventions by different actors).
Reflexivity	Insufficient ability to monitor, anticipate, and involve actors in self-governance processes; Lack of distributed reflexive arrangements to connect different discursive spheres, provide spaces for experimentation and learning; No adaptive policy portfolios to keep options open and deal with uncertainty.

contexts cumulative uneven development, as governance actors ought to engage in double-loop learning processes to adjust or transform their frame of reference, including norms, behaviours, and objectives (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Grabher, 1993; Pahl-Wostl, 2009).

The analysis of transformative agency can instead benefit from aligning with the (neo)institutionalist perspective that considers institutions as co-evolving with actors characterised by bounded rationality and meaningful, purposive behaviours (Koelble, 1995; Lowndes, 1996; Gerber et al., 2020). Recalling the definition of institutional entrepreneurs as individuals and/or organisations that facilitate transformative resilience and institutional change, it is expected that institutional entrepreneurs in peripheral areas exercise their transformative agency by addressing the structural and agency-related failures and challenges brought by adaptive inertia and uneven development. Institutional entrepreneurs can also carry the political position, mandate, or administrative function to mobilise the resources necessary to support pathbreaking and path creation (Nilsen et al., 2022), as well as to generate consensus of and legitimacy on agenda-setting, problem identification, and policy intervention (Bacchi, 2009; Weber & Rohrer, 2012) at multiple governance levels and spatiotemporal scales. Important questions for institutional entrepreneurship emerge from this perspective on failures. For example, can the action of institutional actors make a difference when adaptive

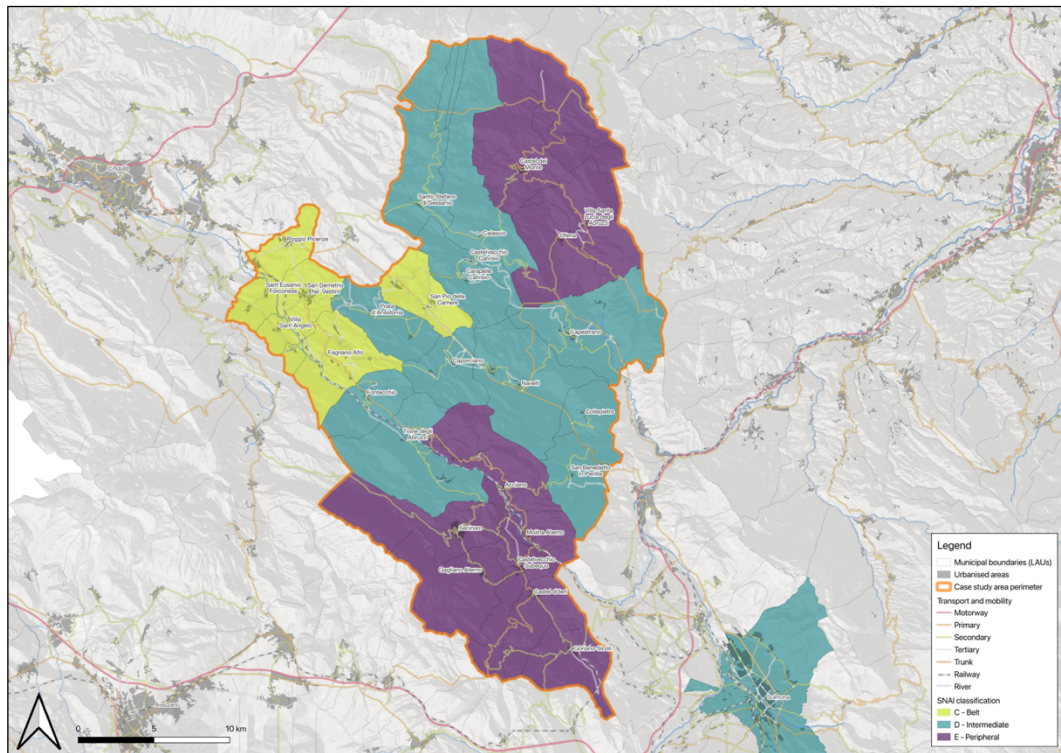


Figure 1.1: The Gran Sasso - Valle Subequana Inner Area, with SNAI peripherality levels and closest city-hubs. The Sulmona hub has been classified as "intermediate" after the 2021 SNAI re-classification. Own representation based on Open Street Map contributors and ISTAT data.

inertia erodes “innovation and agentic capabilities [...] of social actors and institutions” (Pezzi & Urso, 2017, p. 3)? Is transformative change possible if institutions are assumed to be resistant to change due to requirements of compliance, burgeoning bureaucracies, and aversion towards the risks of structural change (Grabher, 1993; Lagendijk et al., 2009; Jessop, 2021; Grillitsch et al., 2023)? Additionally, do silo-thinking, short-sightedness, ambiguity, and uncertainty (Levinthal & March, 1993; Dewulf et al., 2005) risk of undermining the effectiveness of any learning processes in the first place? As these failures represent determinants and contextual (pre)conditions of adaptive inertia, understanding their relevance and extent in specific spatial and temporal contexts could support the identification of potential pathways for institutional entrepreneurship.

3. Design and methodology

Following the conceptual framework presented above, the article operationalises adaptive inertia as a set of failures that hamper transformative agency among institutional entrepreneurs. Which structural and agency-related failures then specifically hamper transformative agency in peripheral places? How do institutional entrepreneurs perceive and tentatively address these failures? To answer this questions, the article applies an interpretive epistemology to access meanings, beliefs, traditions, norms, and discourses (Yanow, 2000; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). These elements are inherited and/or embedded in social practices, actions, language and/or objects, such as behaviours, narratives, knowledge exchanges, and reflexive learning processes (Yanow, 2000; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006; Grillitsch & Rekers, 2016; Bristow & Healy, 2020; Nilsen et al., 2022; Roessler, 2024). They represent sensemaking rationales and the “underlying conceptual logics (or ways of thinking) that shape understandings of policy issues” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 252) and hence contribute to the construction of actors’ frames of references, behaviours, norms and values. Empirically, these data are accessed through the analytical application of the “transformational failures” framework developed by Weber and Rohrer (2012), which provides a systematic overview of both structural and agency-related failures by adding a third set of transformational failures, presented in Table 1.2, to market and structural ones (cf. Annex 1). The research is designed as a constructivist case study in a peripheral area in the Abruzzo Region, Italy, whose choice and characteristics are detailed in the following section.

3.1 The Italian context and the study area: the Gran-Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area

Italy has devoted particular attention the development of Aree Interne (Inner Areas), peripheral mountain systems of municipalities located along the Alps and Apennine mountain ranges. The resulting Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne (Inner Areas

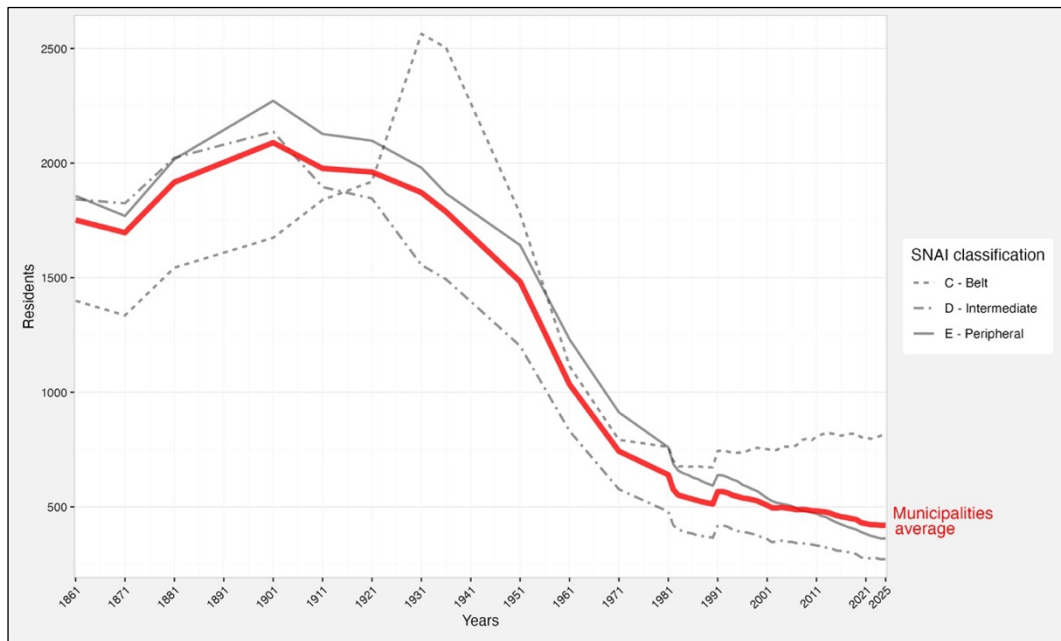


Figure 1.2: Historical trend of resident population in the 28 Inner-Area municipalities, aggregated by SNAI peripherality level. Thicker red line represents average yearly resident population across all Inner-Area municipalities. Own elaboration from ISTAT data.

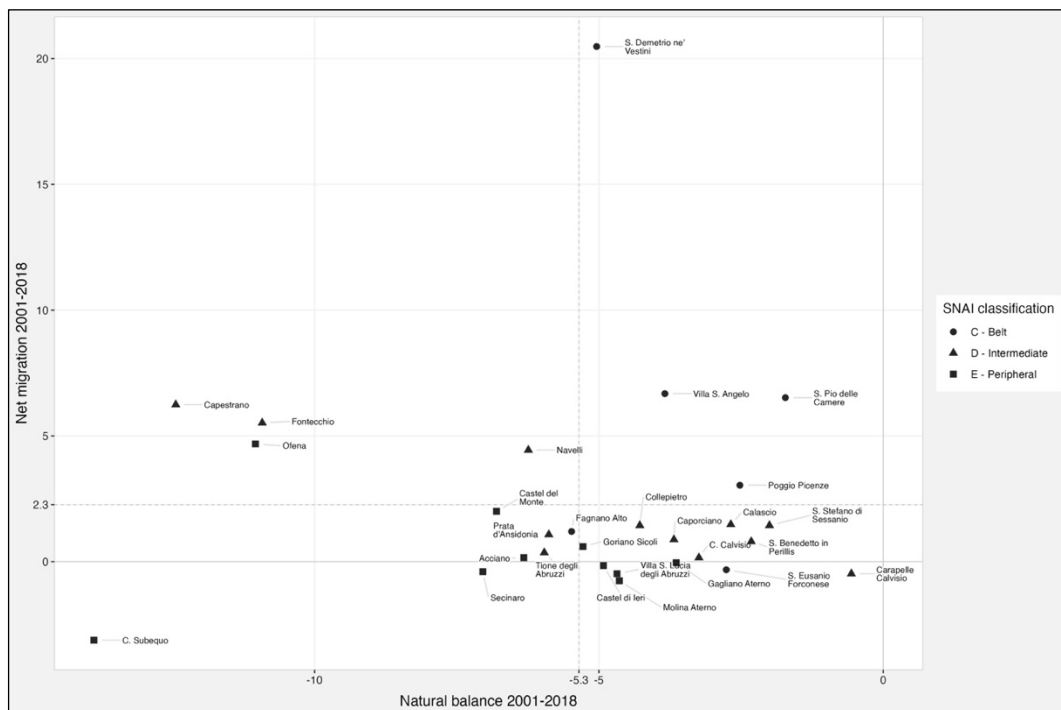


Figure 1.3: Demographic change (average net migration and average natural balance) in the 28 Inner-Area municipalities, with SNAI classification. Dashed lines represent average values across all Inner-Area municipalities. Own elaboration from ISTAT data.

Table 1.3: Indicators for the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana (GSVS) inner area, with reference values for inner areas at regional and national level. Data related to 2022 unless specified. Data retrieved from Dipartimento per le politiche di coesione, 2023.

Indicator	GSVS inner area	Regional inner areas reference	National inner areas reference
Number of municipalities	28	202	3834
of which peripheral or ultra-peripheral	22	202	3834
Number of municipalities in Unione di Comuni	0	39 (19%)	1,696 (44%)
Number of residents (2020)	12,083	460,328	13,432,861
of which in peripheral or ultra-peripheral	7,260 (60%)	460,328	13,432,861
of which aged 0-14 (2020)	11.55%	11.10%	12.48%
of which aged 15-64 (2020)	63.77%	60.53%	63.57%
of which aged 65+ (2020)	26.65%	24.83%	23.95%
Area (km ²)	692,22	6,836.81	177,540,65
Density (residents/km ² , 2020)	17.48	67.33	75.66
Number of firms per 1,000 residents	103.37	116.85	89.75
Growth rate number of firms (2014-2020)	-1.96	-2.82	0.43
Number of tourism visitors per 1,000 resi- dents (2020)	83	131.1	443.8
Tourism receptivity rate (2020)	117.35	127.23	169.26
Municipalities with at least one primary school (%)	28.57%	61.88%	79.11%
Multi-age classrooms (% on total number of classes)	29.63%	5.08%	3.66%

National Strategy, SNAI) aligns with the normative policy goal of tackling depopulation and peripherality by promoting socio-economic development, access to essential services, and territorial cohesion. Qualitative and quantitative indicators have been applied to identify Inner Areas², including measures of the role of institutions, such as intermunicipal cooperation capacity, the presence of active and dynamic (“intraprendenti”) Mayors, the capacity to identify intervention priorities, and others related to management capacity (“capacità di gestione”) (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2013). A pilot implementation of SNAI has started in 2014 for 72 Inner Areas, each of which designed their “Strategia d’Area” (Area Strategy) bringing together firm and non-firm actors across vast thematic and territorial areas (Rossitti et al., 2021; Fusco, 2022). These Strategies require the establishment of intermunicipal systems, which are proposed as instrumental for service provision, for increasing economic attractiveness and job

² Three categories of essential services have been used to first identify city-hubs: education (presence of at least one high school and a technical/professional institute); healthcare (the presence of an aggregated set of emergency-treatment functions and admission facilities); and public transport (the presence of at least one train station with medium-small capacity serving metropolitan-regional and long-distance travelling). Progressive levels of peripherality have then been calculated based on the travel time (private car driving) to reach these city-hubs from all other municipalities (DPS, 2021).

opportunities, and for eventually reducing depopulation trends (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2013; Compagnucci & Morettini, 2020; Fusco et al., 2019).

Located south-east from L'Aquila (the Regional capital of Abruzzo), the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area (Figure 1.1) is purposely selected as case study considering its characteristics of peripherality. The area is divided into two sub-classifications following orographic and infrastructural differences: a predominantly mountainous northern half (Gran Sasso); and a southern half running along the Aterno river valley (Valle Subequana), serviced by the Regional railway connecting the two main cities of L'Aquila and Sulmona. SNAI classified 6 municipalities in the Inner Area as “belt”, 12 as “intermediate”, and 11 as “peripheral” (Dipartimento per le politiche di coesione, 2023). In comparison with the other 6 Inner Areas in the Abruzzo Region, the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area presents the lowest population density (cf. Table 1.3) Although distinguishing SNAI peripherality levels allows to appreciate some variety based on orography (altitude) and distance from the Regional capital of L'Aquila, all municipalities have experienced severe depopulation trends (Figure 1.2), with a 50% to 97% decrease in the number of residents since the first 1861 national demographic census — with an average total population loss of 72%, and all 28 municipalities. Additionally, while 20 municipalities have experienced a positive net migration between 2001-2025, for only 5 of them this inflow of new residents compensates for a negative average natural balance of -5 residents for all municipalities (Figure 1.3).

During the drafting of its Area Strategy, the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana was the only inner area in the Region without an established *Unione di Comuni* (Combined Authority, CA) to support intermunicipal cooperation and service provision. Only the end of 2023 saw the establishment of one CA, while a second followed during 2024. Moreover, the 2009 earthquake that hit the city of L'Aquila had heterogeneous impacts on the Inner Area, leading to different levels of post-disaster community resilience and reconstruction efforts (cf. Fantechi et al., 2020; de Renzis et al., 2022). These and other geographical, demographic, and socio-economic indicators (Table 1.3) represent peripheral nature of Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area. To address this issue, the Area Strategy has allocated a total of 7.52 million €, of which 45% circa (3.39 million €) are targeted to the rebalancing of the essential services of education, public transport, and healthcare (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2021).

3.2 Data-accessing methods

Semi-structured interviews represent the main data-accessing method. A total of 32 interviews were carried out in two rounds across a two-year period, lasted on average 55 minutes, mostly hosted in the premises of the town hall, and involved 27 Mayors out of the 28 municipalities inscribed in the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area (cf. Annex 2). Mayors hence represent institutional entrepreneurs ‘from within’, as their action is both shaped by the formal and informal institutions they are

embedded in, and they are in turn able to influence the evolution and functioning of the municipal public administration they represent. It is important to clarify that municipal public administrations are not conceptually identical with institutions but constitute their organisational *representations* (Boyd & Folke, 2012; Zukauskaitė et al., 2017), or organisational *forms* (Lowndes, 1996). The key role of municipal public administrations (Comuni) originates from the Italian institutional system: they fulfil administrative functions related to the delivery of individual and collective public services (mobility, civic protection, municipal waste management, civil registry, social services, and local police); land use planning; economic development; and decentralisation and cooperation efforts, both with other municipalities and with institutions at higher governance levels. At the beginning of the research, I engaged with the four municipalities directly involved in the Municipal PhD programme³ through formal and informal interaction, which was crucial for providing grounded insights and “informed hunches” (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. xvi) that supported the operationalisation of research topics into interview questions. In the following stage, a set of descriptive statistics was constructed from secondary data on geographical, demographic, and institutional indicators at municipal (LAU) level, to avoid as much as possible the risk of flattening variations in the type and level of peripherality (Nilsen et al., 2022). A first round of interviews was carried out with the Mayors inscribed in the 2014 perimeter of the Inner Area, contacted via email and telephone. After this first round, secondary data were further expanded to include additional territorial indicators concerning economic activities and institutional capacity. Finally, a second round of interviews was conducted to engage with as many Mayors as possible.

I conducted in Italian, recorded, transcribed, and anonymised each interview. Each interviewee provided written consent to participate to the interview and research, including any future research publication. The interview protocol, presented in Annex 2, was then constructed to include four questions derived from the transformational failures framework, with two additional introductory and conclusive questions. Interview questions remained relatively open-ended, along the purpose of interpreting participants’ behaviour on the basis of their own sensemaking, their history, experiences, decisions and strategies (Schoenberger, 1991) around agency and transformational failures. In all semi-structured interviews, I actively engaged with participants in an interactive dialogue (Schoenberger, 1991), by asking clarifications, comparisons, and follow-up questions to elicit further reflections and dig deeper into specific issues, especially when moving from one interview to the following one (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

³ The case study was also selected in light of my involvement in the Dottorato Comunale programme (Municipal PhD), which eased access to the field and the data. Each Dottorato Comunale is an experimental form of PhD research co-designed between public universities and municipal public administrations in an Inner Area. The objective of Municipal PhD is to support “the definition, implementation, study, and monitoring of local sustainable development strategies” (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2021).

After successive readings I performed a content analysis of each transcript through the MAXQDA software. The coding process integrated inductive and deductive approaches to create and analyse codes. I first deductively identified explicit references to transformational failures (classified as code categories) and their mechanisms (sub-categories). Additional sub-categories were then created 'in-vivo' following an open coding strategy based on interpretive-hermeneutic and grounded theory principles (Bryant & Charmaz, 2008; Kuckartz, 2014). I iteratively analysed each transcript in relation to other (temporally successive) interviews, and applied selective and axial coding principles: the first to rearrange, rename, and/or consolidate (Kuckartz, 2014) sub-categories (failure mechanisms) in relation to transformational failure categories; the latter to identify storylines, arguments, normative positions, and framings (Ginger, 2006) of peripherality and institutional agency, as well as the contextual and intervening conditions, strategies, causal conditions, and consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) around transformational failures. The accuracy of data interpretation was also supported by fieldnotes and participant and non-participant observations: throughout the research period, I directly and actively engaged with various forms of local initiatives (several public events, one community meeting, one roundtable, two focus groups, one product design workshop), while I attended numerous other initiatives as non-participant. The interpretation of interview data was also corroborated by 5 additional interviews with technical officers: one from Formez PA (the national agency providing services, assistance, research, and training to public administrations) who participated as project management to the design and carrying out of capacity-building workshops for Mayors in other Inner Areas; one from the staff of the municipality representing the Inner Area and acting as its coordinator (so-called "capofila" municipality); one from the Comunità Montana Sirente-Velino, one of the two Consortia of Mountain Municipalities (CMMs) in the Area which used to carried out intermunicipal service provision and environmental resource management across administrative borders; and two from the SNAI technical-administrative staff for the Inner Area, one of whom is also employed as technical officer in the capofila municipality and in the Comunità Montana.

4. Results: Socio-organisational challenges of change agency

Mayors and technical officers reported how they perceived and witnessed transformational failures, and their attempts of addressing them at intermunicipal level. Among the four failures, directionality was the most frequent transformational failure (31% of coded segments), followed by policy coordination (27%), reflexivity (21%), and demand articulation (21%) (Table 1.4). The order of transformational failures is presented accordingly, including whenever possible the 'voice' of Mayors (M) and technical officers (TO) for each municipality (1-27), after own translation. A more detailed reconstruction of the historical evolution of the uneven development processes and slow burns affecting the Area, as described by interviewees, is accessible in Annex 3.

Table 1.4: Overview of codes categorization around transformational failures (categories) and their mechanisms (subcategories), listed according to frequency in the interviews corpus.

Transformational failures (categories)	Frequency in corpus	Example of included failure mechanisms and in-vivo codes (subcategories)
Directionality	31%	SNAI; Aspirations; PNRR; Public investments and tenders; ...
Policy coordination	27%	Universities and research; Coalitions and networks; Communication and meetings; Temporal mismatch; Institutional overlaps; Unione di Comuni; Multiscalar coordination; ...
Reflexivity	21%	Dialogue and social learning; Resistance to change; Parochialism and identity; Municipal PhD; ...
Demand articulation	21%	Competences and know-how; Mobility; Renewable Energy Community; Tourism; Job opportunities; Youth; ...

Directionality

The first and most frequently-mentioned failure consists in the overall ambiguity of what future local and regional development could entail, and which development pathway would be most promising and feasible. Mayors and technical officers often referred to SNAI and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) as the most important policies providing a development vision for Inner Areas. However, SNAI is perceived with disillusionment, disappointment, and helplessness, arising from the “denaturalisation” (M2, 20/04/23) of its original intent during policy formulation, against its actual implementation:

At the beginning it was a really enlightened idea. It was one of the interventions (if not the main one) to make people still believe in Inner Areas, especially from the perspective of the citizens and the administrators that live in Inner Areas. (M18, 15/03/24)

To be honest, I have to say that we did not see any SNAI here. (M9, 23/01/24)

On a similar note, the PNRR faces similar risks of failing to deliver actual improvements in living conditions and opportunities, although some differences are evident: the funding being allocated to municipal public administrations adds up to a series of space-blind public tenders for grants that ended up creating identical infrastructures across municipalities. SNAI and PNRR also do not seem to provide tangible aspirations and hope for the future, often by overlooking fundamental aspects of the everyday life, from employment opportunities to public transport:

Now there are a lot of money from PNRR, [post-earthquake] reconstruction, but these do not affect a fundamental issue: who works here? (M14, 06/03/24)

When looking to the future, tourism is often depicted as the most feasible and impactful strategy, with short-term improvements for socio-economic development: to increase demand for local farming products, the enjoyment of material and immaterial heritage, and to target specific tourism customers interested in forms of “slow, rural, sustainable, experiential” (M7, 04/10/23) tourism and with higher spending capacity.

In this sense, the Regional Park (the public non-governmental agency for a natural mountain reserve, chaired by one of the Inner-Area Mayors) is pushing local tourism operators to adopt the European Chart of Sustainable Tourism, which can set shared standards and an agreed-upon definition of what sustainable tourism looks like — and hence how it can contribute or hamper to local and regional development. However, here the main reported challenge is the capacity to innovate the existing tourism offer, and to train or upskill practitioners and entrepreneurs:

We still have to learn how to manage this [type of tourism], to train ourselves. This is type of tourism is not poor, and you cannot improvise. (M7, 04/10/23)

I think our village has to live on tourism. But talking about 'tourism' are just empty words (...) I would like to create training opportunities for all those practitioners who work with tourism. (M18, 15/03/24)

Policy coordination

The second most frequent failure is the lack of coordination and coherence among projects and initiatives led by Regional or municipal public administrations and private actors. Here pressing structural obstacles to institutional entrepreneurship emerge: some municipalities have no technical officers (i.e., architects, engineers, accountants), town clerks, police officers, and/or maintenance workers, which hampers their capacity to fulfil even most ordinary functions — from keeping the town hall open to the public, to carrying out maintenance work for green spaces. The lack of specific competences and know-how, including project management, fundraising, and community-organising, also limits opportunities to access public tenders, and carry out related financial accounting once projects have been executed:

Our biggest difficulty is underfunding. And even with public grants, our technical officer is here 9 hours [per week], and although there is one person supporting them, I see they struggle to keep up with the funding opportunities. I mean, we try but miss out on them, it is impossible. (M17, 15/03/24)

[My staff] thought I was crazy, but I got three flipcharts on the wall (...) and I started teaching them how some administrative procedures are fulfilled from start to end. Because if they get into this loop of closing these procedures they save time, gain efficiency, and avoid mistakes. But are other Mayors able to do this [training]? (M23, 24/02/25)

While technical officers are being shared or borrowed from other municipalities in geographical proximity (cf. Urso, 2021) or from L'Aquila, this strategy seems unsustainable due to significant workload increase:

Each [shared town clerk] follows 5-6 municipalities, ours has 8 of them. And so the other day they told me «I am not coming anymore, I cannot make it». Now we have no town clerk. (M9, 23/01/24)

Few municipalities managed to recruit qualified personnel through other opportunities or from external sources: the representative and coordinator (capofila) municipality relies on one SNAI technical officer and managed to participate to a recruitment

tender for two technical-officer positions; one municipality recruited two project managers by allocating ad-hoc resources from a project funded through a public tender; another municipality partnered with an Italian university to host a PhD researcher, under whose leadership a mountain anthropology action-research project was established to host additional researchers, activists, and new (temporary) residents.

Lack of vertical and horizontal coordination across policy domains and governance levels is evident from the temporal mismatch that emerged with both the establishment of renewable energy communities (Comunità Energetiche Rinnovabili, CERs), and the implementation of the SNAI Area Strategy. In the latter, delayed distribution of implementation funds made interventions and projects designed in 2014 no longer feasible, because those budgets are today unrealistically low, nor relevant, as municipalities eventually managed to secure other funding sources to implement the most urgent projects. As for CERs, the early publishing and diffusion of the public investment opportunity mismatched the establishment of available financing schemes: municipal public administrations engaged with and mobilised citizens and local firms for establishing a CER in their municipality, only they later finding out that “State coverage of the expenditure was reduced from 100% to around 65%” (M5, 04/08/23). CERs were hence “put on standby while waiting for parliamentary interrogations, with the probability of having to renounce to the investment opportunity” (M5, 04/08/23).

A major territorial coordination (Macdonald et al., 2023) challenge was presented as “institutional schizophrenia” (M1, 19/04/23): the confusion, complexity, misalignment, and additional bureaucratic procedures originating from the intersection and overlapping of supra-local organisational forms of institutions. Coordination and agreement among Mayors are stronger mostly due to spatial proximity and pre-existing interaction. Mayors are used to the necessity of working together to tackle common issues, such as infrastructure maintenance or repair, provision of school and positive mutual perceptions and interpersonal relations, and willingness to reach alignment and implement these shared solutions. Formal interaction and dialogue are however absent, as meetings and discussions among Mayors belonging to the Inner Area only occur within representative governmental entities:

We have a Whatsapp group chat, but it has been silent for two years. (...) We meet for the Regional Park, as Homogeneous Reconstruction Area, for social services... each of us partially talks with the others, but there is no compact group. (M2, 20/04/23)

Drastic differences among Mayors emerge concerning higher-level institutions, namely the Regional Park, the agency dealing with material and immaterial post-earthquake reconstruction (Ufficio Speciale per la Ricostruzione dei Comuni del Cratere, USRC), the former Consortium of Mountain Municipalities, and the Regional government. Most Mayors report political alignment, also with affiliation to the Fratelli d'Italia party governing the Abruzzo Region (re-elected in 2024). Few others are “merciless” (M4, 24/07/23) towards the Regional government, both due to the

“rigidity in the application and use” (M6, 10/08/23) of very specific funding opportunities, and to the perceived distance of Regional administrators, politicians, and representatives of national agencies, whose officers seldom visit the municipalities and are hence unaware of their development challenges — and of the efforts each municipality is undertaking to promote local development.

Reflexivity

Mayors also reported the absence of formal monitoring and evaluation processes for their Area Strategy, and the lack of collective spaces for formal interaction, discussion, and collective reflection on past and ongoing projects and initiatives. The absence of collective opportunities for reflection hampers intermunicipal self-organisation processes, in turn reinforcing individualism and parochialism (cf. Urso, 2021). While it is characteristic of small, mountain villages as a feeling of independence but also resistance to change, of “rivalry” and “standing out” (“primeggiare”) (M5, 04/08/23), individualism and parochialism contribute to the erosion of reciprocal trust and to disillusionment towards the possibility of moving beyond. Some Mayors nonetheless agreed in considering some ongoing projects as standard-setters, especially in the cases of Gagliano Aterno (the anthropology action-research project, which include establishing a CER) and Fontecchio (aiming at re-inhabiting the village through the promotion of culture and creative practices):

For example, MiM [Montagne in Movimento, in Gagliano Aterno]: things worked and are working because there are people *external* to... the local life. They do nothing more than making residents understand and perceive their potential. The potential is fundamentally there, it is as if we doze off (“assopirsi”) (M11, 28/02/24)

Parochialism and lack of trust also hamper reflexivity itself and the possibility of re-evaluating Mayors’ own value system and attitude towards co-operation, instead reproducing judgemental attitudes among municipalities. Exemplarily, the words of one Mayor that decided to not join a newly-established Combined Authority portray such gap between values and action:

It is a matter of mindset (...). Changing our mindset would make things possible. Look at the CA: we sit down at the table, we are 13 municipalities, (...) I have 2000 residents while you all have 200 (...). We ask who the president of our CA will be. One of us says: «I want to do it, even if I have 200 residents, because it is a matter of representativeness». All right, but what do I get in return? Nothing. A municipality like [ours] would be penalised by this system. If we join the CA, I would have to share our heavy-duty vehicle, the worker, the local policeman, the administrative staff... and they command. But why? Because they have to defend their territory, because they do not understand that, in 10 years, it will be no more! (M23, 24/02/25)

Given the absence of collective knowledge generation through learning, individual responses of Mayors and technical officers were gathered to reconstruct how uneven development unfolded, and which priorities should be addressed (cf. Annex 3). Every

Mayor shared the picture of a vicious cycle consisting in three slow burns: demographic decline, deindustrialisation, and decreased service accessibility. From the ‘hollowing out’ of the countryside after WWII, to more recent deindustrialisation processes affecting the two main city-hubs of L’Aquila and Sulmona, it is clear that no new residents nor services will appear without employment opportunities:

What would I do if I had the resources? A Eurodisneyland? No. A medieval tower with... no. I want employment, because it is fundamental today. (...) If I don’t have employment, what I am doing here? I have to go, no other choice. Why have these villages emptied out completely? Those villages with 50 people... what employment is there? (M8, 17/01/24)

The situation today is dramatic. (...) the young are forced to go away. There is no employment. (...) it critically impacts the whole economic system, natality (...) and so there is no generational change. And again, this reinforces all the other problems affecting the Valley. Unfortunately, this is the reality. (...) Nothing makes us hope for a better future. (TS2, 30/03/23)

Among interviewees, it is also clear that any self-organisation effort should aim at re-establishing some essential services and amenities that can “influence a family’s life choices” (M2, 20/04/23), in terms of (re)location decision: from access to education or free school bus service, to supporting and stimulating community-based initiatives and social infrastructures that are impossible to find in larger urban areas.

That family *bought* a house here and they both work in L’Aquila. So their expenses include travelling with *two* cars, while paying a mortgage. For them it was a ‘ruinous’ choice, but they wanted their children to grow up *in the village*: they wanted them *to live* the village, to have the freedom of living here. But how many people think like them? Doing the math, with their income it is challenging to pay for a mortgage, two cars, and related expenses. (M8, 17/01/24)

Demand articulation

Although the least frequent, important failure mechanisms emerged when Mayors reported their attempts of promoting experimentation with pathbreaking and path-creation. On the one hand, it is sometimes taken for granted that Inner-Area villages are nowadays ‘laboratories with controlled variables’ (cf. Tomeo & Pazzagli, 2024), as the sheer number of residents, entrepreneurs, and community organisations facilitates their engagement and mobilisation. Mayors themselves reiterate the centrality of municipal public administrations as enablers of pathbreaking and path-creation, often by supporting experimentation and conveying leadership through active personal involvement, beyond their administrative role. A deep-participation and co-design narrative was reported, as involvement of multiple stakeholders is often depicted as necessary step, beyond envisioning participation as an added-value to facilitate the sustainability of projects and initiatives:

You really feel part of something becoming alive, (...) that connects you to the territory and does not make you feel like a passive participant. If you come here, you will immediately be allowed to take part to something in line with your attitudes and capacity. (M4, 24/07/23)

Defining the local community and its members is nonetheless continuously negotiated and reconstructed, in a painstaking 'familiarisation' process that benefits from community organising and the active involvement of local leadership figures, such as long-term residents, activists, and local entrepreneurs.

On the other hand, municipal administrations often struggle anticipating the needs of their communities and promoting experimentation, both due to the lack of an "entrepreneurial culture" (M2, 20/04/23) and to low institutional capacity. Mayors reported the lack of specific competences and risk-aversion among (potential) entrepreneurs for establishing new or more innovative activities, also arising from a challenging spatial context:

I am trying to make people understand they can do some training, such as courses to become mountain-bike tourism guides. I am not sure we will find the right manager for this activity [that we are trying to establish], but dealing publicly and participatorily with this criticality allows us to plant the idea in someone's mind, thinking «well maybe the administration wants something more, otherwise that activity will fail in time». We made clear what we were looking for, right away with the people and then officially at administrative level. (...) Today we have great competences to deal with the [participatory] process, while we miss marketing for our territory and the promotion of this new type of community tourism. (M4, 24/07/23)

Similarly, Mayors also reported the difficulty of supporting ongoing initiatives due to the lack of competences and know-how among their staff. Scarce financial resources, and an administrative regulation blocking new hirings in the public administration, contribute to curb human resources:

We are not listened to: old laws that proscribe the Municipality to not spending more than its 2009 budget (...). The famous Stability Pact that froze Municipalities like ours. We are doing very well and have the financial resources to hire one employee, but we cannot by law (...) and citizens do not know about nor understand this, and they ask me how it is possible that we do not hire anybody. (M24, 03/03/25)

The effect is that most Mayors depict themselves as immediate uptakers rather than adaptive promoters of projects and initiatives. Hence municipal administrations often struggle addressing interrelated challenges in their projects and initiatives, striving for a delicate balance between their survival and the implementation of more innovative and/or radical initiatives. Tourism and post-earthquake reconstruction provide a fitting example: with ongoing reconstruction and recovery, Mayors' attempts to address low housing availability for temporary and/or new residents clashes with the desires of homeowners, who are either waiting for reconstruction, risking to lose intergenerational place attachment and the habit of 'coming back', or refuse selling or renting their units to enjoy short and medium stays during holidays or summer months.

5. Discussion

The primary data presented confirm the narrative of peripheral places having lost their innovation and agentic capabilities (Pezzi & Urso, 2017) due to the progressive adaptive inertia and its failure to upgrade and modernise (Martin & Sunley, 2020). The article offers a transdisciplinary contribution to the literature on economic geography, (neo)institutionalism, and on the agency perspective in regional economic resilience. It also provided the opportunity to test and adapt a heterodox epistemological approach through the transformational failures framework. Some failure mechanisms have necessarily been reframed around the institutional dimension of transformative agency, while maintaining as much as possible their original formulation. For example, demand articulation (anticipation of user needs for technological uptake in the technological innovation context) is reframed as the proactive engagement of local residents and entrepreneurs by the Mayor and its municipal administration. Similarly, horizontal co-ordination (across sectors and policy domains) becomes more similar to the concept of territorial coordination (across administrative jurisdictions and functional spaces) (Macdonald et al., 2023). The framework still resulted a fitting, transferable, and useful (cf. Schwartz-Shea, 2006) analytical lenses to identify and systematise strategies, contextual conditions, and consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) of institutional entrepreneurship in the Gran Sasso - Valle Subequana Inner Area.

Mayors' and technical officers' perceptions and experiences of peripherality and adaptive inertia provided important insights onto the identification and systematic contextualisation of structural and non-structural obstacles to institutional entrepreneurship in the Inner Area. Accessing the institutional dimension of transformative agency at the municipal level allowed not only to identify how Mayors make sense of, embody, and reproduce formal and informal institutions through their own regulations, values, and behaviours; but also to clarify that their agency is sometimes strongly conditioned (Sotarauta & Grillitsch, 2023) by the overarching institutional and economic structure in which municipalities are embedded. For example, lack of human capital and know-how and scarcity of entrepreneurial activities are the most common and urgent obstacles to institutional entrepreneurship. Similarly, the quality of relationship with higher-level governmental bodies (e.g., the Regional government, the Regional Park, national ministries, the USRC agency) emerges as key structural factor that influences Mayors' capacity of agenda-setting and problem identification. Transformative agency appears as heterogeneously distributed across municipalities, with some municipal institutional entrepreneurs showing stronger transformative capacity than others despite common structural conditions of peripherality and uneven development. Some municipalities still seem nowhere close to recovering from uneven development outcomes, especially due to the massive outmigration experienced after WWII, to their spatial remoteness, and to the impacts of the 2009 earthquake. The primary data therefore depict transformative agency in the Inner Area as highly path-

dependent (Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018a): the historical unfolding of cumulative uneven development processes have constructed a pervasive “haemorrhagic narrative” (M7, 10/08/23) that burdens institutional entrepreneurs with fatigue, disillusionment, and frustration, as well as even anger towards failed regional development policies — including SNAI, which did not provide municipal administrations with adequate human capital for implementing local and regional development strategies (Barca, 2021).

The weakness of institutional entrepreneurship in the Inner Area also emerges from non-structural and immaterial obstacles. The transformational failures framework unveiled an array of organisational and socio-cognitive challenges, namely parochialism and lack of trust, predominance of pre-existing interaction, temporal mismatches, weakness or lack of coordination, and ambiguity in the desired development future and development pathway. These challenges signal the importance of developing intermunicipal institutional entrepreneurship, where individuals, organisations, and groups thereof at multiple governance levels can constitute coalitions, networks, and new institutions across administrative (municipal) boundaries. The weakness of such intermunicipal form of transformative agency in the Gran Sasso - Valle Subequana Inner Area seems to arise from the fact that municipal institutional entrepreneurs are “still learning how to be together” (M3, 07/06/23). Younger Mayors seem in fact more capable to move beyond these challenges, and are better suited to understand transformative resilience as an internalised and decentralised process (Castán Broto et al., 2019).

Although most Mayors personally knew each other before the formal establishment of the Inner Area, this new geography did not promote a shared identity. The north-south division persisted in the new configuration, the Unioni di Comuni (CAs), which recalls the perimeter of the former Comunità Montane (CMMs), hence forging collective agency on existing and consolidated interactions. The establishment of CAs will allow to transfer financial resources from CMMs, and to take up social-service functions from participating municipalities. CAs are also believed to “simplify and organise” (M1, 19/04/23) intermunicipal service provision, to create a larger critical mass for negotiations and agenda-setting leverage with Regional and national institutions, and to renew the sense of unity and necessity to craft shared solutions to shared problems. However, the lack of collective learning processes, of monitoring and evaluation efforts, as well as formal spaces for interaction and discussion can undermine future intermunicipal forms of transformative agency, including the capacity of exercising meta-governance (Jessop, 2021) functions through the CAs. Besides, it remains to be seen whether such new intermunicipal forms will be more adaptive and appropriate to facilitate transformative resilience.

Although the presented transformational failures, and spatial inequalities in general, are detrimental to aspirations and hope, eroding the political imagination (Smith, 2010) of alternative forms of community welfare, each municipality is experimenting with forms of pathbreaking and potential path-creation: offering case studies for national and foreign universities dealing with reconstruction, preservation, and

valorisation of material and immaterial heritage; upscaling to neighbouring municipalities a successful action-research and temporary residency project that promotes the conditions for “neo-popolamento” (neo-inhabiting) (Montagne in Movimento (MiM), na); hosting artistic residencies and cultural-creative production that promote intercultural exchange and integration of foreign new inhabitants in the village; engaging with citizens, firms, and community organisations in participatory planning for urban regeneration, as well as in the establishment of renewable energy communities.

The interpretation of results also seems to delineate a rough sequential pattern of transformational failures among municipal administrations, which could be further explored and empirically tested in future research endeavours. Addressing reflexivity failures is the first necessary condition for establishing collective processes of double-loop learning, to address conflicts and value-action gaps, and eventually secure shared intentions and willingness to strengthen intermunicipal cooperation. Directionality could then guarantee the effectiveness of such meta-governance processes, especially by resolving the ambiguity of desired outcomes and the misalignment in development pathways. Coordination across governance levels, sectors, and between firm and non-firm actors hence would stem naturally from sustained interaction, (political) alignment, and co-operated projects and initiatives. Eventually, intermunicipal forms of transformative agency would entail sharing human, financial, and intellectual resources, also by reconfiguring administrative responsibilities and/or functions at different governance levels, and by promoting consensus on how to integrate space-blind (e.g., tax reliefs and financial incentives to firms) with place-based interventions (e.g., service accessibility, sustainable/slow tourism) relying on the improved capacity to engage with and mobilise entrepreneurs, residents, and community-based organisations. It is important to recognise that future research should further define how these transformational failures are complementary to system and market failures (Weber & Rohrer, 2012), and how *together* they can provide a comprehensive framework to inform and promote learning among local and regional policymakers.

Conclusions

The development of peripheral and ‘left-behind’ regions remains a complex but urgent issue. To achieve the normative policy goal of reducing spatial inequalities, it is necessary to address the determinants and contextual (pre)conditions of “adaptive inertia” (Martin & Sunley, 2020, p. 19), interpreted as the twofold failure in addressing slow-burn pressures and increasing the capacity to reflexively learn, adapt, and transform ongoing strategies to address them. The research adapted the analytical framework of transformational failures to identify structural and agency-related obstacles to transformative agency. It was designed around the case study of the Gran Sasso - Valle Subequana Inner Area in the Abruzzo Region, Italy. I collected primary data to identify transformational failures among municipal public administrations, and

to understand whether and institutional entrepreneurship can address these failures. Data were accessed via two rounds of semi-structured interviews with Mayors and technical officers, and iteratively triangulated with descriptive statistics, participant and non-participant observations, and fieldnotes. Perceptions, experiences, strategies, contextual (pre)conditions, and consequences were inductively and deductively grouped under the four transformational failures of directionality, policy coordination, reflexivity, and demand articulation.

Accessing the institutional dimension of transformative agency at the municipal level, through Mayors' and technical officers' perceptions and experiences of peripherality and adaptive inertia, allowed to reconstruct the contextual and historical conditions of peripherality in the Gran Sasso - Valle Subequana Inner Area; and to assess how transformational failures represent structural and agency-related obstacles to institutional entrepreneurship and, in turn, transformative resilience. The research argues that, without effective processes of policy learning, reflexive governance, meta-governance, and intermunicipal cooperation, municipal public administrations are destined to reproduce functional, cognitive, and political lock-ins (Grabher, 1993) that result in adaptive inertia and progressive peripheralization. Mayors and municipal administrations emerge as critical actors to support and/or implement pathbreaking and path-creation processes in Inner Areas. It is clear that Mayors feel the responsibility and potential to support spatial justice and more inclusive regional development policies — using the words of the first interview participant, “if not institutions, who will do this?” (M1, 19/04/23). However, it is crucial to address the structural barriers to the emergence and patterning (Nilsen et al., 2022) of institutional entrepreneurship. On the other hand, agency-related obstacles to institutional entrepreneurship include ambiguity of the development vision and misalignment around the potential and feasibility of development pathways. Additionally, a general lack of coordination across spatial and administrative levels results in these municipalities struggling with fulfilling even more ordinary administrative functions. Some Mayors have promoted ongoing experiments to halt progressive peripheralization, but these initiatives risk being confined within municipal administrative boundaries. Learning from and transferring these strategies crucially requires moving beyond cognitive and organisational challenges, such as parochialism, absence of monitoring and evaluation efforts, and lack of formal spaces for interaction.

The research contributes to studies on and empirical analyses of institutional geography, although all three strands of literature combined in the transdisciplinary framework could benefit from replicating in-depth investigations of how transformative resilience shapes actors and institutions, and how in turn these contribute to refine it from the bottom-up. Moreover, the article suggests current research and policy debates to shift the perspective on ‘left-behind’ and peripheral places to the analysis of institutional capacity and transformative agency. If we agree that “transformational change at smaller scales enables resilience at larger scales” (Folke et al., 2010), we

expect Inner Areas to be perfect environments for experimenting with sustainability transitions in food and energy systems, service accessibility, and community building. I believe future research could investigate the complementarity of the institutional dimension with the two other dimensions of transformative agency (innovative entrepreneurship, place-based leadership). Similarly, a comparative analysis of transformational failures in different settings could provide important empirical evidence on the relevance of institutional entrepreneurship for transformative resilience. In addition, empirical evidence is needed on whether intermunicipal forms effectively support transformative resilience, and especially whether this is done through the strengthening of collective agency or thanks to the initiative of single individuals or organisations. If these new institutional forms are interpreted as “forms of governance [that] arise as products of actions that embody multiple beliefs” (Bevir, 2006, p. 282), it seems that intermunicipalism is both a functional strategy to answer short-term needs as well as promoting a more fundamental, transformative, and long-term objective of self-organisation and empowerment of ‘left-behind’ places.

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Declaration of interest statement

The author report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethics statement

Each interviewee provided written consent to participate to the research, to be interviewed by the author, to be recorded, and to publish anonymised accounts in any future research publication output.

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Annex 1: Overview of the failures framework

The following table presents the complete failures framework developed by Weber and Rohrer (2012), describing transformational next to market and system ones, as envisioned by the authors.

Table A1.1: Complete version of the transformational failures framework as proposed by the authors, with market and structural-system failures. Adapted from Weber and Rohrer, 2012.

Type of failure	Failure mechanism
Market failures	
Information asymmetries	R&D underfunding due to uncertainty and temporal mismatches among private investors.
Knowledge spillovers	Socially sub-optimal R&D investment due to public good character and/or leakage of knowledge.
Externalization of costs	Environmental or societal damage from cost externalisation.
Overexploitation of commons	Lack of regulation/limit on exploitation of public resources.
Structural system failures	
Infrastructural	Lack of long-term and large-scale investments on physical and/or knowledge infrastructure.
Institutional	Hard failure: absence or excess of regulations and standards from formal institutions; Soft failure: hindrance of innovation process from informal institutions (e.g., trust, risk-taking, culture).
Interaction or network	Strong failure: lock-in into established trajectories and knowledge due to inward-looking behaviour and lack of weak ties; Weak failure: limited interactions and exchanges with external actors.
Capabilities	Lack of competencies and resources needed in path creation.
Transformational failures	
Directionality	Lack of shared vision on transition goal and direction; Inability of collective coordination of actors involved in shaping systemic change; Insufficient regulation or standards to guide and consolidate the direction of change; Lack of targeted funding for research, development and demonstration projects and infrastructures to establish corridors of acceptable development paths.
Demand articulation	Insufficient spaces for anticipating and learning about user needs to enable the uptake of innovations by users; Absence of orienting and stimulating signals from public demand, lack of demand-articulating competencies.
Policy coordination	Lack of multi-level policy coordination across governance levels or between technological and sectoral systems;

Table A1.1 (continued): Complete version of the transformational failures framework as proposed by the authors, with market and structural-system failures. Adapted from Weber and Rohrer, 2012.

	Lack of horizontal coordination between research, technology and innovation policies, and sectoral policies (e.g., transport, energy, agriculture); Lack of vertical coordination between ministries and implementing agencies; No coherence between public policies and private sector institutions; No temporal coordination (mismatches in timing of interventions by different actors).
Reflexivity	Insufficient ability to monitor, anticipate, and involve actors in self-governance processes; Lack of distributed reflexive arrangements to connect different discursive spheres, provide spaces for experimentation and learning; No adaptive policy portfolios to keep options open and deal with uncertainty.

Annex 2: Interview guide

Each interview started by presenting the scope and aim of the research and securing written consensus to participate and to be recorded, while still being able to ask for pauses in the registration any time they were not comfortable with providing on-record accounts. All interviewees (Table A1.2) were free to ask clarification questions. Each question was introduced around the related transformational failure, while related mechanisms were provided as examples in cases when clarification was asked, or to eliciting additional information on specific issues deemed relevant during the interview.

1. (Contextual introduction and slow burns) Which are the main material or immaterial barriers and obstacles that, in your opinion, affect this area?
2. (Directionality) In light of your experience, what does the potential development direction or vision for this area consist in? Do you think this vision is shared among other public administrators and supralocal actors (e.g., USRC, Regional government)?
3. (Policy coordination) How would you assess the level of horizontal coordination (among administrators throughout the Inner Area) and vertical coordination (with supralocal actors) for the construction and implementation of regional development policies?
4. (Demand articulation) How and with which instruments does the municipality seek to intercept the needs and requests for intervention and policies of the local community? Could you provide some examples of related activities (e.g., past, ongoing or future initiatives, projects, strategies) that you implemented (or attempted to)?

5. (Reflexivity) In your opinion, do adequate spaces (physical or virtual) exist for meeting, dialogue, and engagement [confronto] to help different regional actors monitor and evaluate regional development policies and strategies?

Table A1.2: Semi-structured interview participants, their associated role and institution.

ID	Role	Institution	Date (mm/yy)	Duration (min)
TO1	Technical officer	Municipality 1	03/22	81
M1	Mayor	Municipality 1	04/23	53
TO2	Technical officer for SNAI, Municipality, and CMM	SNAI, Municipality 1, CMM	04/23	53
TO3	Technical officer	CMM	03/23	73
M2	Mayor	Municipality 2	04/23	62
M3	Mayor	Municipality 3	06/23	92
M4	Mayor	Municipality 4	07/23	64
M5	Mayor	Municipality 5	08/23	48
M6	Mayor	Municipality 6	08/23	48
M7	Mayor	Municipality 7	10/23	73
M8	Mayor	Municipality 8	10/23	48
TO4	Technical officer and project manager	Formez PA	01/24	30
TO5	SNAI technical officer	SNAI	01/24	30
M9	Mayor	Municipality 9	01/24	45
M10	Mayor	Municipality 10	02/24	45
M11	Mayor	Municipality 11	02/24	60
M12	Mayor	Municipality 12	02/24	45
M13	Mayor	Municipality 13	03/24	38
M14	Mayor	Municipality 14	03/24	53
VM14	Vice-Mayor	Municipality 14	03/24	53
M15	Mayor	Municipality 15	03/24	58
M16	Mayor	Municipality 16	03/24	65
M17	Mayor	Municipality 17	03/24	49
M18	Mayor	Municipality 18	03/24	49
M19	Mayor	Municipality 19	03/24	60
M20	Mayor	Municipality 20	06/24	65
M21	Mayor	Municipality 21	06/24	47
M22	Mayor	Municipality 22	06/24	35
M23	Mayor	Municipality 23	06/24	67
M24	Mayor	Municipality 24	03/25	33
M25	Mayor	Municipality 25	03/25	45
M26	Mayor	Municipality 26	03/25	37
M27	Mayor	Municipality 27	03/25	40

Annex 3: Reconstruction slow-burns and cumulative uneven development processes

Mayors and technical officers reconstructed slow-burns as historical onset of a vicious cycle, consisting of demographic decline, deindustrialisation and lack of employment opportunities, and reduction of service accessibility. After a mostly-constant demographic growth, with some municipalities having more than 3.000 residents although noticeable differences among mountain-valley areas, and among those closer to larger cities such as L'Aquila and Sulmona (Figure A1.1), a striking outmigration

occurred in the first decade of the XX century due to the phasing out of a feudal agricultural economy (cf. De Nardis, 1994).

Outmigration slowed down during the interwar period, as land ownership provided an opportunity for self-sufficiency (“you needed the land to eat but not for paying taxes, not for making investments and improving your living conditions”, M3, 07/06/23) resulting in “decentralisation towards the countryside, the villages and hamlets” (M3, 07/06/23). The second, more significant demographic decline took place around 1951, as socio-economic inequalities pushed dwellers of mountain and inner-peripheral villages to migrate towards urban and metropolitan areas within and outside the Region. This phenomenon mostly affected male workers, with considerable psychological impacts on the women, children, and elderly that remained as only active members of agro-silvo-pastoral economies. Then, new employment opportunities in industrial districts in the two main city-hubs of L’Aquila and Sulmona fuelled hopes and “a projection on the future” (M3, 07/06/23), especially after 1971 with the establishment of CMMs:

Imagine this: in my years we had buses collecting students and blue-collar workers throughout the Valley. Two packed buses! Driving students, factory workers, and office employees to Sulmona and L’Aquila. You could also get there by train. (TO2, 30/03/23)

In more recent years, the incremental closure of these very same industrial activities has reinforced demographic decline: outmigration is hollowing out not only peripheral villages but city-hubs as well. Feelings of nostalgia and resignation hence construct a “haemorrhagic narrative” (M7, 10/08/23):

families moved, and keep on moving, Sulmona is losing residents despite being a city with 25.000 inhabitants. It loses more than 2.000 people per year. If they are having this issue there... If even the attractive city-hub loses inhabitants, then connected municipalities lose people as well. (...) If both L’Aquila and Sulmona lost residents, each for their own reasons, they lose services as a consequence. L’Aquila had the earthquake blow (...). Sulmona lost services, firms, and factories. (TO3, 19/04/23)

Closures of industrial districts, public offices, and spatially dispersed jobs in transportation (especially railways), education, healthcare, and postal offices significantly reduced the overall attractiveness of Inner-Area municipalities. Once again, distinguishing among SNAI peripherality level shows that the municipalities closer to the Regional capital of L’Aquila have in fact gained new residents, while the average trend of residents across all 28 Inner-Area municipalities remains declining (Figure A1.2).

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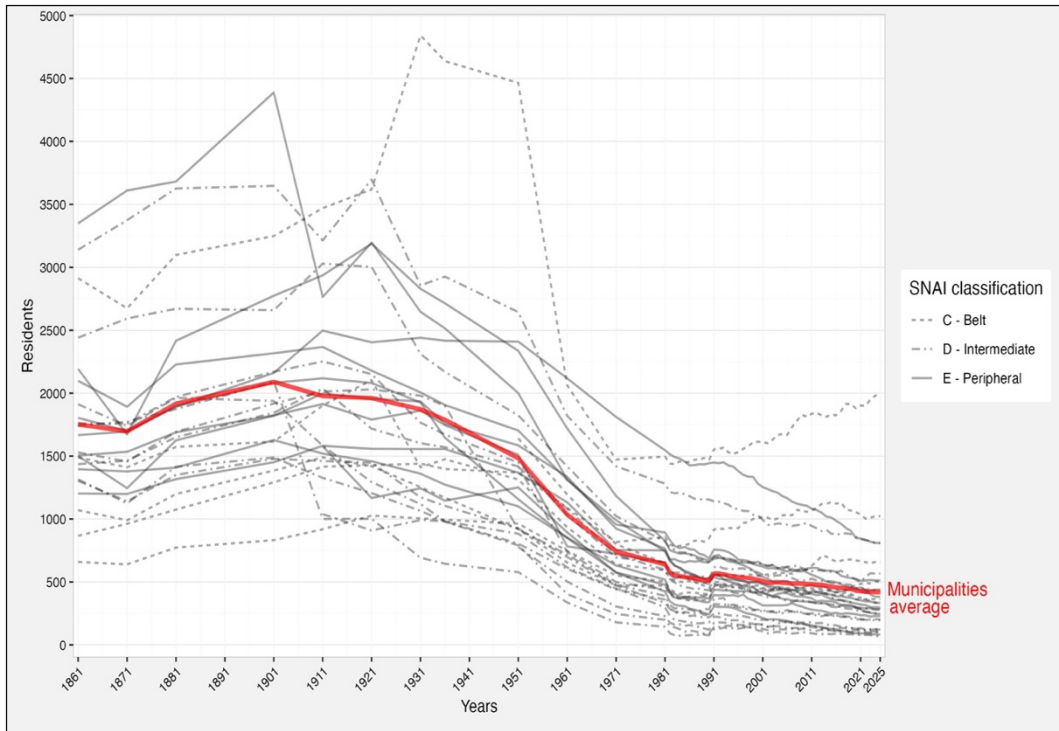


Figure A1.1: Historical trend of resident population in all 28 Inner-Area municipalities, with SNAI peripherality level. Thicker red line represents average yearly resident population across all Inner-Area municipalities. Own elaboration from ISTAT data.

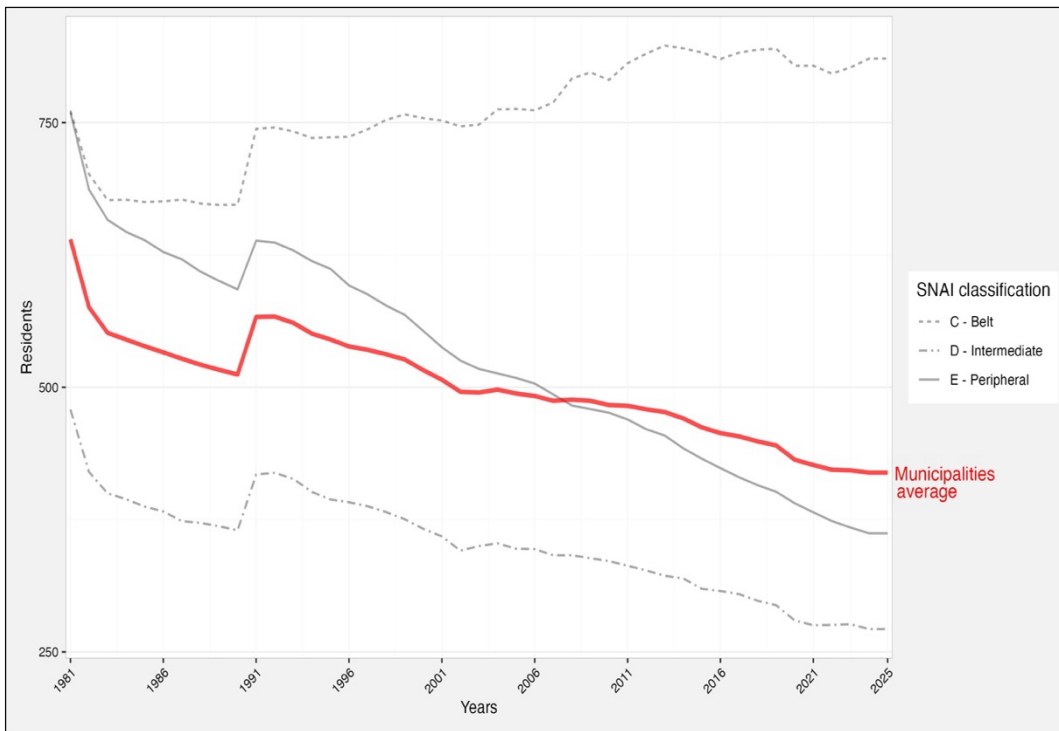


Figure A1.2: Resident population in all 28 Inner-Area municipalities for the period 1981-2025, aggregated by SNAI peripherality level. Thicker red line represents average yearly resident population across all Inner-Area municipalities. Own elaboration from ISTAT data.

CHAPTER 2

Service provision “against all odds”: accessibility and spatial justice in an Italian Inner Area¹

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Abstract

Geographically uneven development progressively eroded the provision of welfare services, including the most critical for habitability conditions. Peripheral and ‘left-behind’ places seem locked in between weak service demand and the constant need for policy intervention to safeguard an otherwise economically-unsustainable welfare provision. These patterns entail alarming repercussions on spatial justice in peripheral areas, including quality of life, social practices and infrastructures, and the ‘attractiveness’ of places. The accessibility of services of general interest (SGIs) hence represents a (pre)condition for local and regional development. It is however still unclear how accessibility is differentiated across types of services and peripheral places, nor whether mere presence is enough to operationalise accessibility. We contribute to the local and regional development and regional science literature by providing a nuanced, multi-layered, and territorially-sensitive understandings of services accessibility and peripherality, defined through Open Street Map data integrated with field mapping. We define

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and assess accessibility to 10 categories of SGIs as their presence, diversity, and distance among municipalities within in an Italian Inner Area, chosen as case study. We identify core-periphery patterns within and outside the Inner Area, as well as a more nuanced interpretation of ‘centralities’ among municipalities, based on the presence of different types of services, and we analyse how accessibility varies depending on the function of SGIs — whether they answer to everyday or higher-level needs.

Keywords

Inner areas – SGIs – Regional development – Services – Accessibility

1. Introduction: Peripheralization, access to services, and the role of local institutions

The patterns of geographically uneven development bring dire impacts on socio-economic conditions of residents and communities. Especially in more peripheral areas, limited (if not absent) access to welfare and service provision is a significant issue, especially as it impacts the everyday life of residents, their perspectives on the future, and the construction of narratives of discontent and feeling of being ‘left-behind’ (Servillo & Fontana, 2021; Royer et al., 2022; Collicelli, 2024; Calignano, 2026). An interplay of endogenous and top-down pressures have led to a significant restructuring and rescaling of welfare and services, including depopulation, ageing, the withdrawal of the state, austerity measures, privatisations, and cuts in public expenditure (Connell et al., 2009; Governa, 2014; Clifton et al., 2016; Carrosio, 2019; Compagnucci & Morettini, 2020; Fiorentino et al., 2024; Fontana & Servillo, 2024; Clifton et al., 2026). Against this backdrop of subtractive recalibration (Carrosio, 2019) of provision systems, service provision in peripheral areas faces important organisational and cost-efficiency challenges, including the thinness of user basins, geographical remoteness, low institutional capacity, and scarce financial resources (Tödtling & Trippl, 2005; DPS, 2021; Urso, 2021a; Nilsen et al., 2022; Royer et al., 2022; Pike et al., 2023). The lack of economies of scale, also arising from low population density and spatial distance among urban settlements, depicts peripheral areas as ‘unfit’ for welfare provision and proximity services accessibility (DPS, 2021; Delsignore, 2023).

Existing literature has emphasised the potential of collective processes for engaging with multiple local actors in the co-production of welfare and service provision, represented as a potential strategy to restore accessibility (Collicelli, 2024; Letta, 2024). It is however still unclear how service accessibility can be operationalised and assessed as a determinant for transformative resilience (Martin & Sunley, 2020; Trippl et al., 2024) in peripheral areas. While accessibility is a general term which goes beyond the binary presence or absence of a specific service, the characteristics of peripheral areas, such as low population density and geographical remoteness, entail a more complex and layered understanding of service accessibility, including distance

and diversity of available services. Moreover, we acknowledge that different types of services could present differentiated distribution and access. A more detailed analysis could hence provide important information on how accessibility to welfare and services affects everyday social practices and quality of life.

The present research analyses service accessibility in terms of presence, diversity, and distance of a wide range of proximity services (services of general interest, SGIs), with the objective of analysing the spatial distribution of accessibility in a context of uneven development outcomes. We apply the analysis of secondary data on georeferenced points of interest (POIs), representing proximity and essential services, to a case study in the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area in the Abruzzo Region, Italy. The following section reconstructs the changes in the services sector and its relevance in regional development policy, with particular attention to the Italian context of Inner Areas. Then research design and methodology are presented, together with a brief description of the case study area. Results are presented along the three constitutive elements of services accessibility, namely presence, diversity, and distance, and discussed against the theoretical background of uneven development and transformative resilience.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Restructuring of service provision in peripheral areas

A complex interplay of macro-global processes, unfolding since the second half of the 19th century, structurally changed accessibility to welfare and services: the onset of neoliberal and New Public Management waves in the 1970s, the 2008 global financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the subsequent austerity measures and cuts in public expenditure, led to the defunding of welfare services and the reorganisation of public service-provision agencies and institutions (Connell et al., 2009; Governa, 2014; Clifton et al., 2016; Tomaney et al., 2024; Tomeo, 2024). The impact of these processes was exacerbated in peripheral areas, which were already suffering from cumulative impacts (Tomaney et al., 2024) of progressive peripheralization, due to de-industrialisation, selective outmigration, and depopulation and ageing. These uneven development patterns (Smith, 1984/2010; Pike et al., 2023) eventually led to the marginalisation of peripheral areas and to the loss of individual rights (Tomeo, 2024), due to reduced access and/or lower affordability of services for residents and communities. Moreover, the services restructuring process was centred around cost efficiency and economic sustainability, based on market principles and a neoliberal economic model (Fiorentino et al., 2024; Leggero, 2024). Peripheral areas are therefore labelled as “weak demand areas” (Autorità di Regolazione dei Trasporti (ART), 2017), due to structural constraints that make service provision inefficient from a purely financial perspective. Similarly, SGIs are interpreted as ‘market-failure services’ (Delsignore, 2023), hence requiring constant

public policy intervention to introduce compensating and correcting mechanisms, to ensure the equality of access to welfare and services, while addressing territorial specificities and needs (Klein Woolthuis et al., 2005; Dijkstra, 2022).

Restoring access to welfare and services hence represents the policy goal of ensuring equal access to services independently from where individuals are born or choose to live (Clifton et al., 2016). It aligns with the concept of spatial justice (Hadjimichalis, 2011; Woods, 2023), as it provides the opportunity to address unequal social and power relations while adopting a political and historical perspective on future development in peripheral areas. It also represents a pathway towards new employment opportunities and economic activities, for the safeguarding of basic (European) citizenship rights, and as a means to enable equal opportunities while recognising territorial diversity (Clifton et al., 2016). The objective is therefore central to promote territorial cohesion through regional development policy, and it is particularly relevant for addressing geographically uneven development in peripheral, marginalised, and so-called ‘left-behind places’ (Pike et al., 2023). The European Union cohesion policy agenda has devoted particular attention and funding to ensuring access to welfare and services in peripheral areas, and to safeguard the ‘right to stay’ (Letta, 2024) of residents. Specifically, the Rural Pact aims at “identifying means to improve rural quality of life, achieve balanced territorial development and stimulate economic growth in rural areas” (A Long-Term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas, 2021). Some EU Member States have designed and implemented ambitious and innovative agendas for promoting the endogenous development of peripheral areas, and to support them in building upon their territorial characteristics. Ad-hoc national investment plans to explicitly improve the provision of essential services in peripheral areas are being implemented, for example, in France with the Agenda Rural and in Italy with the *Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne* (National Strategy for Inner Areas, SNAI) (UNCCEM, 2019). The following section describes how the latter addressed service accessibility.

2.2 Inner Areas: regional development and essential services

The main objective of the Italian *Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne* (National Strategy for Inner Areas, SNAI) is to address, halt, and potentially reverse slow-burn processes (Pendall et al., 2010) of progressive peripheralization. Designed in Italy in 2014 by the Agency of Territorial Cohesion, and including a public investigation process integrating 161 quantitative indicators with qualitative data collected on the field (Rossitti et al., 2021), SNAI represents the first explicitly place-based policy that addressed accessibility to essential services, the valorisation of environmental and cultural heritage, and the establishment of intermunicipal agreements for the promotion of local and regional development. In the SNAI framework, Inner Areas represent new administrative geographies whose perimeter was drawn based on an accessibility indicator (i.e., travel-time distance by private car in minutes) between a municipality and its closest

polo (city-hub) (DPS, 2021). The latter were identified based on their offer of a set of services labelled as ‘essential’, namely education, healthcare, and public transport^[1] (DPS, 2021). The resulting index of ‘central’ cities was employed to categorise each municipality in Italy across 6 levels: city-hubs, intermunicipal hubs, and belts, with a travel-time distance below 20 minutes; followed by intermediate (up to 40 minutes), peripheral (up to 75 minutes), and ultra-peripheral (more than 75 minutes) municipalities, which represent Inner Areas. A new geography of peripherality therefore emerged from this classification, where Inner Areas correspond to 60% circa of the national area, 22.4% of the population, and 51.7% of the total number of municipalities. In general, Inner Areas correspond with mountain territories that have experienced continuous depopulation trends from the second half of the 19th century (DPS, 2021), as represented in Figure 2.1. Among these Inner Areas, 72 were selected for a pilot implementation of SNAI in 2014. Each of these 72 areas drafted its Area Strategy, which includes details on the territorial context, its characteristics as peripheral areas and the related uneven development outcomes, and a description of envisioned interventions and project, with allocated financial resources, time scale, and expected results (Rossitti et al., 2021).

It is important to acknowledge that SNAI introduced “core innovations” (Pezzi, 2017, p. 6) in regional development policy. First, SNAI explicitly recognises the improvement of service accessibility as a pathway for local and regional development, following the rationale that enhancing service provision can eventually increase the attractiveness of Inner-Area municipalities, establish new economic activities and investments, and eventually reduce (possibly, invert) structural depopulation trends. More strictly related to service provision and accessibility, SNAI promotes functional polycentrism (Compagnucci & Morettini, 2020) and emphasises peripherality as a

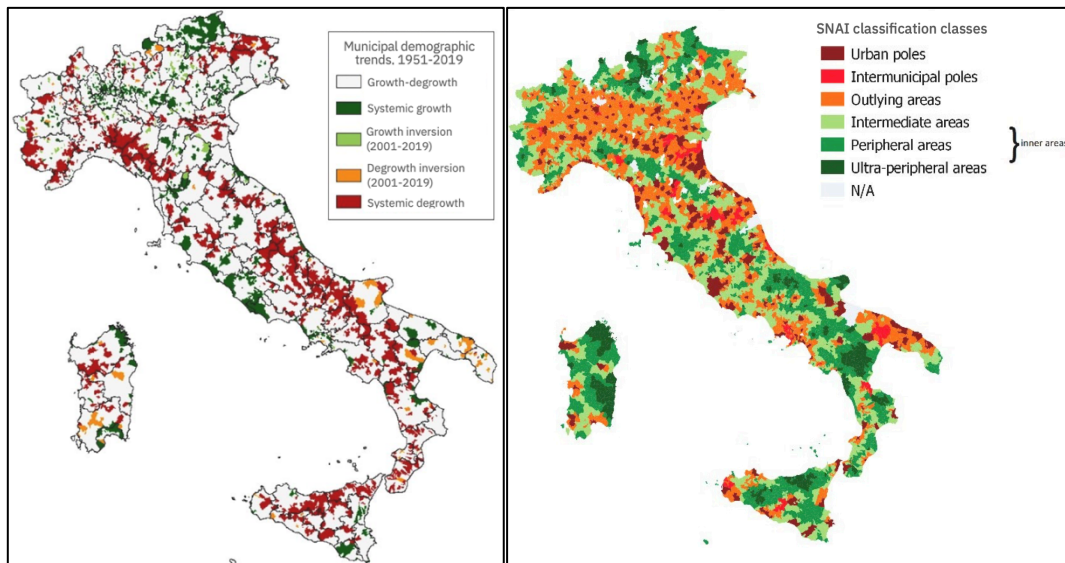


Figure 2.1: Municipal demographic trends in Italy (1951-2019), left, and SNAI classification of central and peripheral areas, right. Adapted from <https://www.lenius.it/spopolamento-in-italia/>, accessed 15/09/2022, and Urso et al., 2019.

relative criterion — as some essential services can be provided by neighbouring municipalities, irrespective of their size or distance to a city-hub. An additional innovative aspect of SNAI is the renewed importance attributed to intermunicipal cooperative arrangements, which can reduce transaction and service provision costs by enlarging catchment areas to municipalities (Giacomini et al., 2018). The expansion of user basins also emerges as a necessity to ensure the economic sustainability of welfare services that require relatively large numbers of users across spatial scales, such as hospitals and schools. Intermunicipal arrangements are also intended to increase the efficiency of policy implementation, thanks to the sharing of human resources (cf. Urso, 2021a) and to improvements in how planned regional development policy interventions are managed and carried out (Romagnoli & Mastronardi, 2020). Despite its innovative and place-based nature, SNAI raised critical debates on the type of services taken into account to identify centres and peripheries, and on the relationship between ‘essential’ services and SGIs to ensure quality of life for communities in peripheral areas.

2.3 Proximity and general-interest services beyond “essentials”

The SNAI policy emphasised tourism and the valorisation of natural and cultural heritage as key sectors to support local and regional development in peripheral areas. This perspective was however criticised for reproducing a “partial and limited vision of cultural heritage as tourism attraction” (Rossitti et al., 2021, p. 5), and for choosing not to account for the presence of museums, other cultural services, as well as services other than just education, transport, and healthcare in the identification of centres (DPS, 2021; Rossitti et al., 2021). Several reasons justify the importance of expanding the array of services taken into account to identify ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’ places. First, we recall that peripherality and centrality represent relative concepts (Pezzi & Urso, 2017; Pike et al., 2023) that cannot be constructed on structural and/or spatial indicators alone, as in the case of SNAI with travel-time distances from three ‘essential’ services. Second, different types of services carry specific accessibility requirements and social practices attached to provision and access, and different impacts on everyday life of residents vary across different types of services. For example, access to food (e.g., supermarkets, farmers markets, grocery stores), other types of healthcare (e.g., pharmacies and general practitioners), and personal care (e.g., hairdresser, beautician, social interaction) vary depending on motility, age, and personal preferences (Vendemmia & Lanza, 2022). Similarly, younger generations carry specific demands and needs, such as housing security and integration with the local community (Sonzogno et al., 2022), which can be met by other forms of culture and entertainment (e.g., museums, libraries, social community centres).

Accounting for this expanded view on services (and SGIs) therefore aligns with calls for more relational (Pezzi & Urso, 2017; Pike et al., 2023) and nuanced understanding of both polycentrism and peripherality, to account for everyday social

practices, quality of life of residents, their needs and aspirations, and associated social infrastructures (MacKinnon et al., 2022; Tomaney et al., 2024). We also recognise the need for a different operationalisation of services accessibility, one that allows access to micro-scale analyses at the sub-regional and intermunicipal level. In doing so, we can offer a more detailed picture on the varieties of peripherality (Nilsen et al., 2022), building upon a multi-layered interpretation of accessibility to a wider range of SGIs, and eventually supporting the identification of ‘centralities’ based on functional relations rather than mere distance from larger urban and metropolitan areas.

3. Methodology and data

We investigate SGIs accessibility in peripheral areas by analysing secondary data on their presence, diversity, and distance in a case study design, which corresponds to one of the 72 SNAI pilot project areas: the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area in the Abruzzo Region, Italy. The following sections describe the case study area and the methodology employed to access Open Street Map (OSM) data for SGIs in the 28 municipalities in the Inner Area.

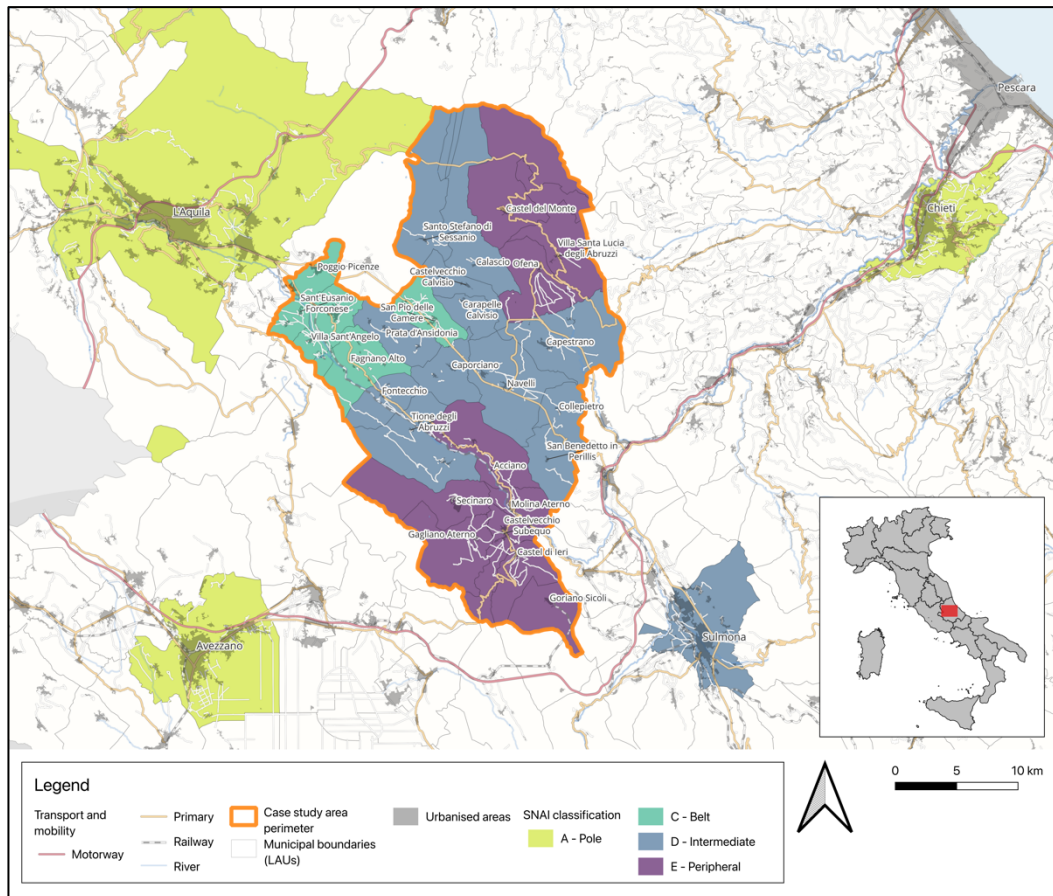


Figure 2.2: The Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana case study Inner Area, with SNAI classification (peripherality levels). Own elaboration based on Dipartimento per le politiche di coesione (2023) and Open Street Map contributions.

3.1 Case study area: description and context

The Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area (hereby ‘the Area’) consists in 29 municipalities, 7 of which are classified as belt, 12 as intermediate, and 10 as peripheral (Figure 2.2), for a total of 13.7 thousand residents in 2020 (Dipartimento per le Politiche di Coesione, 2025). It is a predominantly mountain area bounded by the Gran Sasso mountain (2,900 m, highest peak in the Italian Apennine range) and the Sirente-Velino range (2,400 m). It is the lowest-density Inner Area in the Abruzzo Region, with only 17.48 residents/km², compared to a Regional and national average for Inner Areas of 67.33 and 75.66 residents/km² respectively. The Area lost on average 84% of its population since 1861 (the first population census), with 4 municipalities losing more than 90%, and only 3 showing positive demographic change in the last 50 years. The total number of registered residents ranges from 1,980 and 1,020 to 83 and 70, with an average of 420 residents.

The existing Area Strategy for the Area set the goals of “rebalancing the offer of essential services” and to “adequate” and “improve the quality and quantity” of services concerning education, healthcare, and transport, including the “monitoring [...] of implemented solutions, [and] evaluation of their specific impact” (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2020, pp. 6–7). Around 45% (3.3M €) of the total Area Strategy funds were hence allocated to the rebalancing and improvement of essential services. At the moment of its establishment, the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana was the only Inner Area in the Region that did not institute one or more Combined Authority (CA) to manage and offer services at intermunicipal scale — while 44% of Inner-Area municipalities in Italy on average belong to a CA.

3.2 Data access and analysis

We accessed the OSM database of points of interest (POIs) in the Abruzzo Region that represent a wide range of SGIs. These were selected following previous studies on service accessibility that account for proximity services tailored to everyday individual needs (e.g., Lorenzetti & Leggero, 2024; Royer et al., 2022; Schürmann et al., 2017; Vendemmia & Lanza, 2022). We grouped and classified these SGIs creating a system of categories and subcategories, through an inductive analysis of the data that builds upon existing classifications (within OSM) as well as upon fieldwork activities conducted in the Inner Area by one of the authors. The resulting categories are: banks, ATMs and post offices; cultural heritage and creative practices (e.g., libraries, art centres, museums, archaeological sites); cafes and restaurants; education (all levels); fuel stations; healthcare (e.g., hospitals, all types of doctors and clinics); hotels and tourism accommodations; public transport; shops; social and community functions (e.g., town halls, sport facilities, community centres). Our database consists in a total of 12,088 POIs, divided among the 10 abovementioned categories and 55 additional subcategories.

Annex 1 provides a detailed description of the queries employed to access OSM data, their manipulation and the associated workflow, and counts for each retrieved category and subcategory before and after their classification.

We calculate the presence and diversity of POIs for each municipality in the Inner Area, and the travel-time distance (by private car) from each municipality centroid to each POI. To define the maximum amount of travel time by residents, and hence set an upper boundary to the travel-time isochrone centred around the Inner Area, we first apply the 75-minute threshold employed in SNAI to identify “ultra-peripheral” municipalities (DPS, 2021). Rather than assuming residents travel within the whole Region, this threshold therefore serves the heuristic purpose of setting a maximum admissible distance, with Inner-Area municipalities as origin of travels. Given the uneven distribution of urban settlements, a characteristic of the Region with a strong polarisation towards the coast (Fuschi & Cilli, 2022), we reduce the 75’ threshold to focus our analysis on everyday social practices and quality of life, rather than on the possibility of travelling more than one hour to reach any given service.

The first alternative specification employs a 40-minute cutoff, which is again based on the SNAI travel time threshold that defines ‘peripheral’ municipalities (DPS, 2021). To increase the representativeness of the analysis on accessibility and its impact on everyday life and social practices, we decided to further reduce the maximum travel-time cutoff to 30 minutes, which represents the optimal daily travel time for individuals based on circadian rhythms (Zahavi, 1974, in Compagnucci & Morettini, 2020). Descriptive statistics are then computed for the total number of SGIs, within Inner-Area municipalities or in their 30-minute isochrone, and for travel times, both at the subcategory detail and aggregated at the category level. The following section presents the three main results on the presence, diversity and distance of SGIs for municipalities in the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area, and related cartographic representations.

4. Results

We first identify the distribution and concentration of SGIs in Inner-Area municipalities. We then analyse the diversity of different types of services in each municipality. Lastly, we measure travel-time distance of SGIs from each municipality.

4.1 Accessibility as presence and diversity

We consider accessibility as presence by measuring and mapping the absolute number of POIs reachable from municipalities in the case study Inner Area, irrespective of their service category or subcategory. We first measure and map the presence of SGIs within the 75’ threshold, to empirically access and represent the core-periphery pattern in the Abruzzo Region between its inner-mountain and coastal sides. The

concentration of POIs is here represented as a heatmap, displaying areas with at least 50 POIs in a 5 km radius; and it is then combined with a quantile representation of the number of POIs reachable from each municipality in the Inner Area (Figure 2.3). The resulting cartographic visualisation of POIs density allows to identify spatial concentrations of SGIs along lower-altitude and coastal urban agglomerations, the highest of which can be found in Pescara (118,440 residents) and its metropolitan area, followed by L’Aquila (70,420 residents), and other small- and medium-sized cities such as Avezzano (41,270), Sulmona (21,570), Popoli (4,560); followed by urban areas along the coast and the highway that connects the inner mountain areas to the coast. For municipalities in the case study Area, SGIs accessibility seems reversed with respect to the SNAI peripherality classification (cf. Figure 2.4): municipalities in the western side of the Inner Area show a lower accessibility than those on the eastern side, although being closer to the Regional capital of L’Aquila.

In order to define accessibility in terms of proximity and everyday practices, rather than opportunity to travel, we introduce the 30-min travel time cutoff to account for individual circadian rhythms and daily mobility patterns of Inner Area residents (Compagnucci & Morettini, 2020). We represent the density of POIs in the Inner Area municipalities and in their 30-minute isochrone. The resulting accessibility map presents similarities to the SNAI classification system, where municipalities closer to the

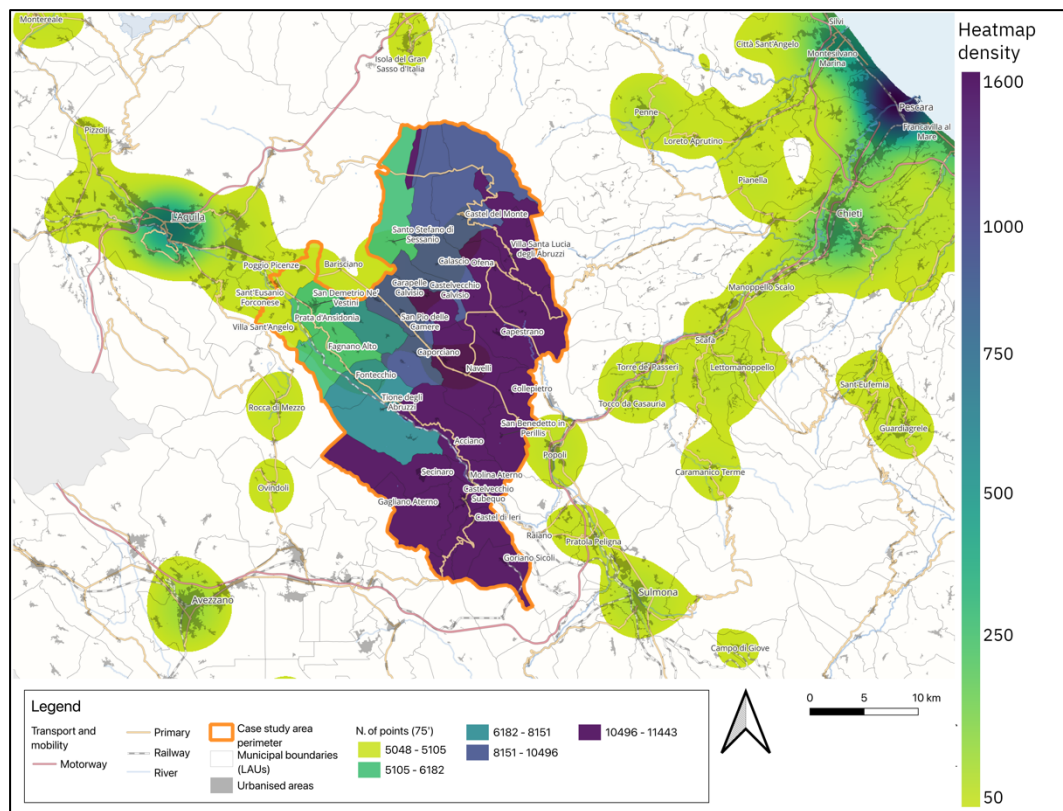


Figure 2.3: Number of POIs reachable within a 75' car drive from the 28 Inner Area municipalities, and their distribution for concentrations above 50 POIs within 5 km. Own elaboration on Open Street Map contributions.

Regional capital of L'Aquila are positioned in higher quantiles of the distribution (Figure 2.5). Spatial proximity to the (larger) urban areas of Sulmona and Popoli plays a similar influence on accessibility as presence of SGIs.

We then introduce the diversity of SGIs categories and subcategories into the analysis, to identify services that are either ubiquitous or concentrated across municipalities in the Area. Among the 10 categories we defined, culture emerges as ubiquitous and largest, followed by healthcare and banks and post offices, although with a drastically lower number of POIs (as reported in Table 2.1). Conversely, fuel stations, education, and public transport are the least present categories across the Inner Area, and with the lowest number of POIs. On the other hand, significant differences within each category emerge when accounting for the subdivision in subcategories. As for culture and heritage, for example, which is present in each Inner Area municipality with multiple POIs, we notice that subcategories mostly consists in material heritage sites, at the expenses of entertainment and social aggregation facilities, such as museums, libraries, and cinemas. Similarly, some subcategories such as guesthouses (bed and breakfast) and hotels (within the 'accommodations' category) are highly concentrated in only a small number of municipalities.

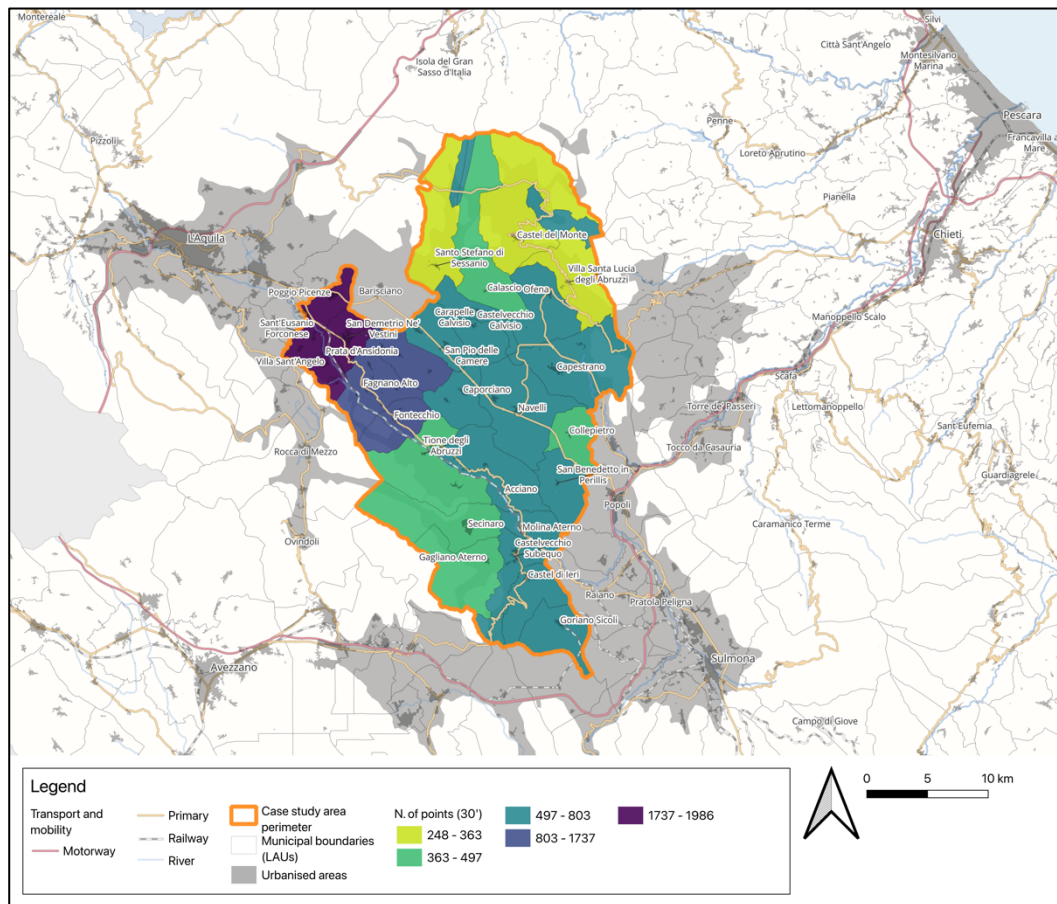


Figure 2.4: Number of POIs reachable within a 30' car drive and related 30' isochrone from the 28 Inner Area municipalities. Own elaboration on Open Street Map contributions and Openrouteservice.

Table 2.1: Cumulative scores for presence and diversity of SGIs categories, and selected subcategories, for the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area, sorted by total number of POIs. Education reports the respective ISCED level.

Category of SGI	Number of municipalities with at least 1 POI	Total number of POIs within the Inner Area	
Culture and heritage	28	292	
Religious sites		28	180
Library; Museum		2	2
Arts centre		1	2
Theatre		1	1
Cinema		0	0
Social facilities	28	56	
Townhall		28	30
Sports		13	17
Community centre		5	9
Healthcare services	25	38	
Pharmacy		24	25
Clinic; Socio-psychological care		2	2
Banks and post offices	24	30	
Post office		23	23
Bank		4	4
ATM		3	3
Bars and restaurants	23	87	
Pubs and restaurants		21	65
Bars and Cafes		17	22
Accommodations	22	54	
Guest house		16	24
Hotel		9	22
Public transport	16	32	
Bus stop		10	24
Train station		7	8
Shops	15	39	
Convenience store		8	10
Food and groceries		7	8
Bakery; Supermarket		5	5
Personal care		3	3
Bookshop		1	1
Education services	9	19	
Kindergarten		7	7
Primary school (1)		6	6
Secondary school (2)		3	3
Secondary school (3); Professional school (4); University (6-8)		0	0
Fuel stations	7	9	

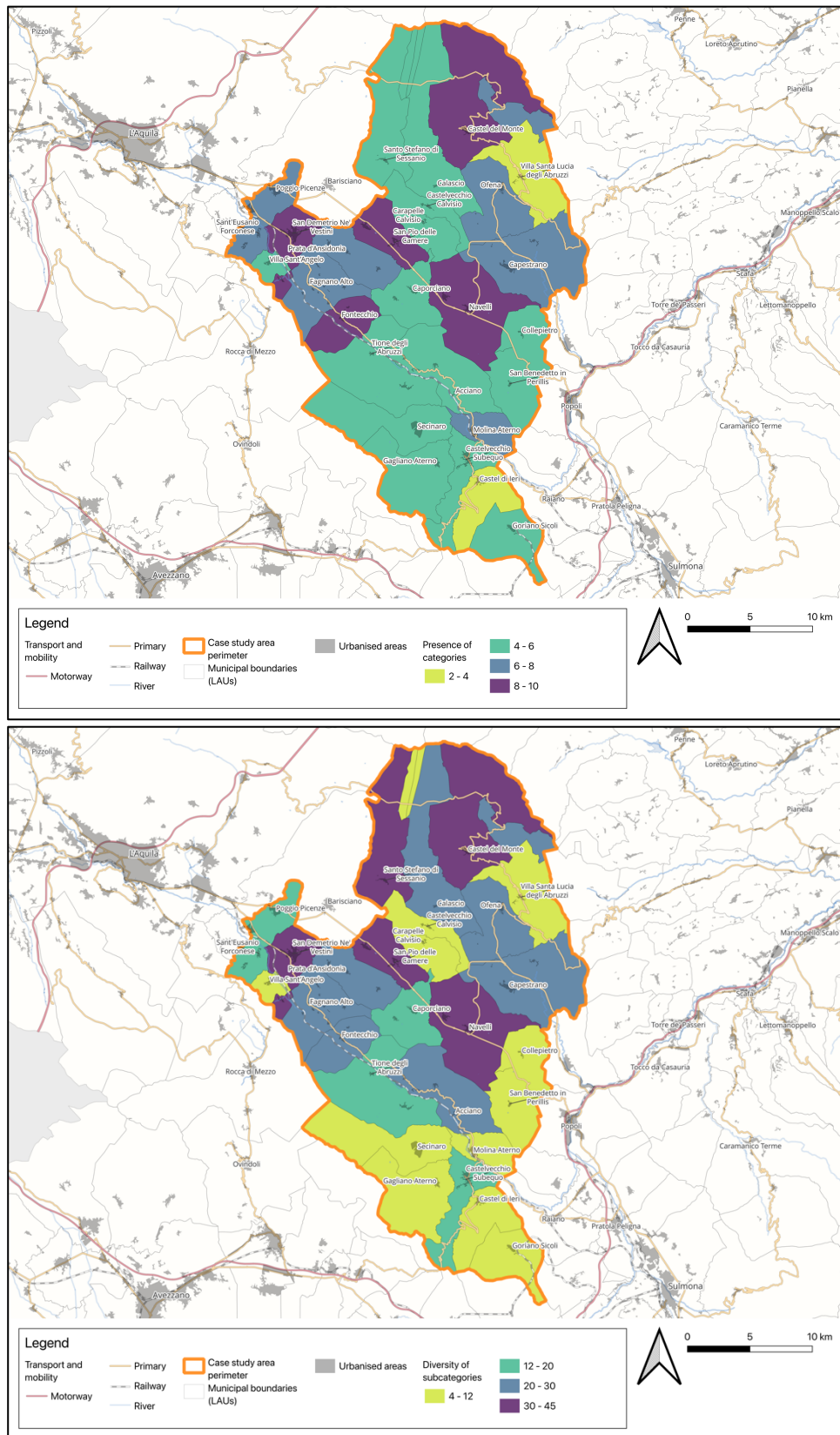


Figure 2.5: MCOA maps for the presence of service categories (top), and diversity of subcategories (bottom) for the 28 Inner Area municipalities. Own elaboration on Open Street Map contributions.

The cartographic representation of the presence and diversity of SGIs also shows significant differences among municipalities in the Area. Neither presence nor diversity seem to overlap with SNAI peripherality levels, as the four municipalities where all SGI categories are present have heterogeneous structural and geographical conditions, including altitude, population sizes, presence of education services, and structural dependency rates. Disaggregating SGIs at the subcategory level further increases the variety of accessibility among municipalities. Some municipalities are ‘confirmed’ as hosting a wider range of SGIs than others, such as Navelli, Castel del Monte, San Demetrio ne’ Vestini, and San Pio delle Camere, which correspond to villages with more residents and lower demographic decline. On the other hand, a mountain municipality such as Santo Stefano di Sessanio presents a higher variety of specific types of services (subcategories) than others placed along the Aterno river valley. Meanwhile, the municipalities with lowest diversity include both remote mountain ones (e.g., Villa Santa Lucia degli Abruzzi) and the ones located along the south-eastern border of the Inner Area — those with the highest structural dependency rates within the Inner Area.

4.2 Accessibility as distance

To analyse accessibility to proximity services for Inner Area municipalities, hence accounting for everyday needs and daily mobility patterns of residents, we analyse the travel time from municipality centroids to each POI. We set the maximum duration of all travels to 30 minutes, and the minimum to 5 to exclude travels within the same municipality.

All services categories emerge as reachable with a 21-minute travel from the Inner Area municipalities. Social facilities show the lowest travel time mean, with its three subcategories of community centres, townhalls, and sports facilities sharing a mean travel time around 20 minutes. On the other hand, secondary schools (high schools) and doctors represent the SGIs with highest travel times, around 25 minutes. Comparing travel times across categories (Figure 2.6, Table 2.2), we notice a significant accessibility gap that seems related to the distance from the Regional Capital of L’Aquila — i.e., the SNAI peripherality classification of Inner Area municipalities.

For some categories, including bars and restaurants, culture and heritage, and public transport, a wide gap in accessibility between peripheral and non-peripheral municipalities emerge when passing the 15’ threshold. In other cases, such as education, fuel stations, healthcare, and tourism, accessibility decreases gradually and directly proportionate to the distance from L’Aquila. Within the 15’ threshold, banks and post offices and social facilities also emerge as the two only categories that show higher accessibility for more distant municipalities, which can be explained in light of the even distribution of post offices and townhalls (one in each municipality).

Accessibility varies considerably across Inner Area municipalities and within service categories. As for community centres, for example, only 3 municipalities show a

Table 2.2: Descriptive statistics for travel times (TT) across categories in minutes, and total number of POIs, aggregated across all 28 Inner-Area municipalities. Minimum travel time is ≥ 5 . Categories listed alphabetically.

Category	TT mean	TT median	TT mode	Minimum TT	#POIs
Banks and post offices	21.3	21.8	26.9	5.4	1020
Bars and restaurants	21.9	22.2	28.6	5.0	3579
Culture and heritage	20.9	21.5	28.6	5.0	8848
Education services	21.2	22.1	29.3	5.1	903
Fuel stations	22.0	23.4	25.8	5.0	560
Healthcare services	20.7	21.8	29.8	5.0	1051
Public transport	22.1	22.9	25.0	5.1	3083
Shops	21.9	22.2	28.5	5.0	2350
Social facilities	20.5	21.5	28.8	5.0	1607
All categories (average)	20.9	21.7	28.7	5.1	

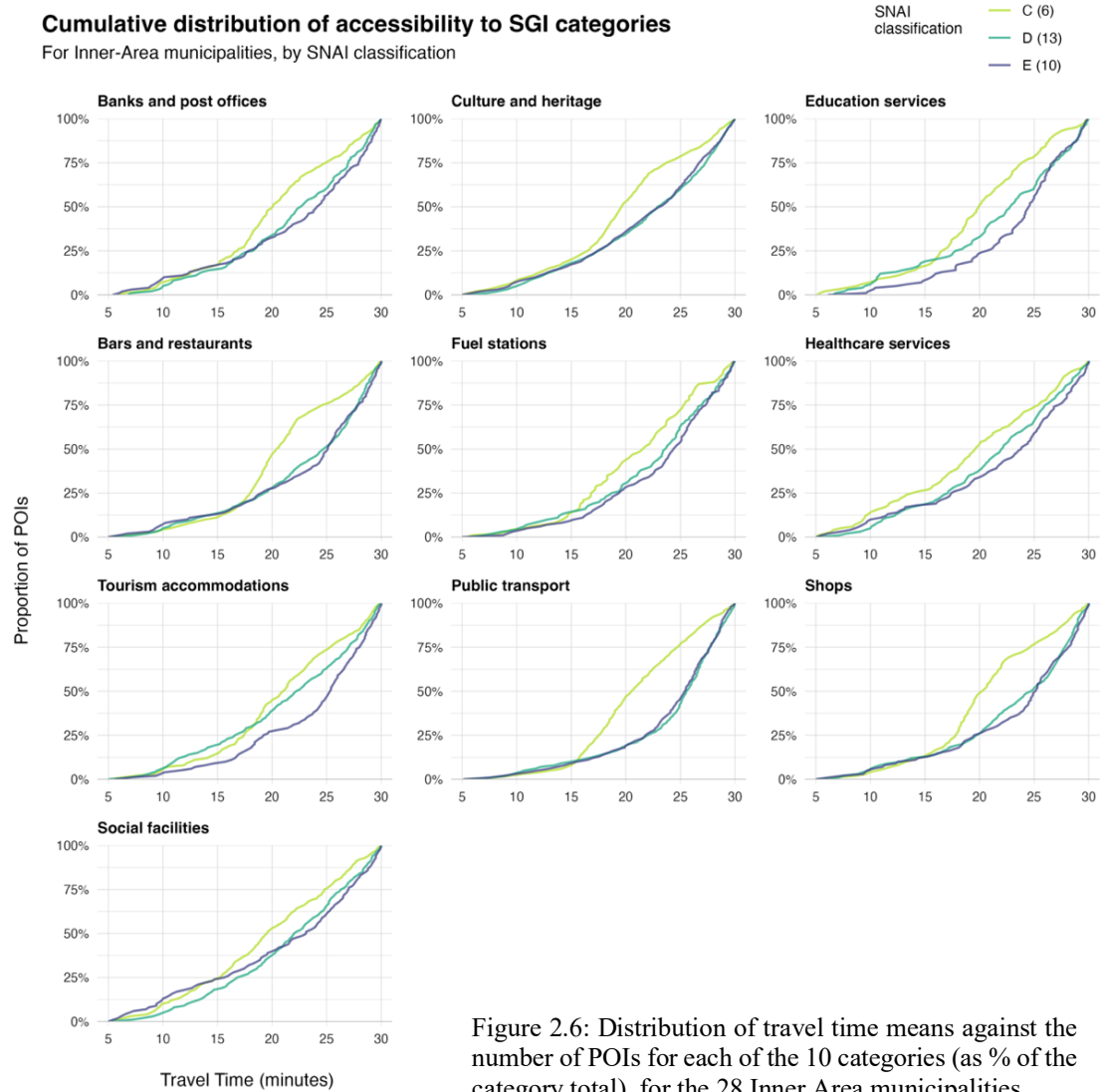


Figure 2.6: Distribution of travel time means against the number of POIs for each of the 10 categories (as % of the category total), for the 28 Inner Area municipalities.

travel-time mean lower or equal to 15'. On the other hand, fuel stations, public transport, and accommodations emerge as the three lowest-ranking categories. This entails that reaching a fuel station requires on average from 18 to 26 minutes, that municipalities without a train station travel from 5 to 28 minutes to reach the closest halt, and that the closest receptive structure could be as far as 5 or up to 25 minutes.

To interpret the impact of these travel time statistics on everyday social practices and quality of life, we also consider the mode of the travel time distribution in lieu of the frequency of travels (Figure 2.7). Results show that only 5 municipalities share a mode between 16 and 20 minutes; for 6 municipalities, most frequent travels take between 20 and 25 minutes; while the majority (17 municipalities) usually travels 25 to 30 minutes. Comparing travel time modes at subcategory level across all municipalities, we notice

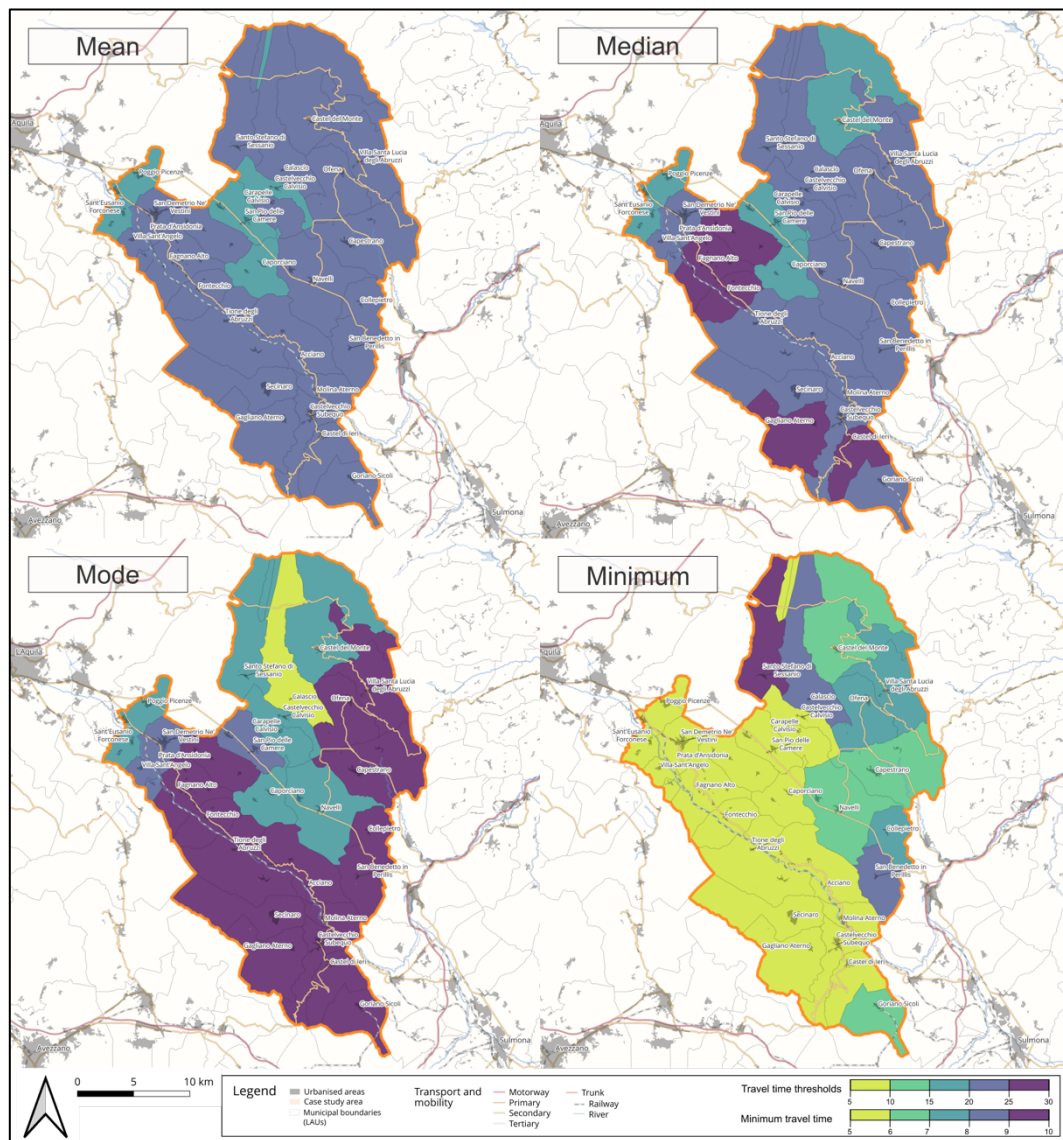


Figure 2.7: Visualization of travel time statistics for the 28 municipalities in the Inner Area. Own elaboration on Open Street Map contributions and Openrouteservice.

that rural receptive structures ('agriturismo') present the lowest mode (11'), followed by theatres, bus stops, and personal care shop (19'), and primary schools (19-20'). On the other hand, pharmacies, pubs and restaurants, and B&Bs show the highest travel time mode (29-30'), followed by post offices, bookshops, kindergartens and museums (29'). What emerges from this representation of accessibility as frequency of travels, and accounting for the significantly low minimum travel time statistics, is a substantial difference in how the proximity of services is interpreted. While our analysis does not access individual mobility patterns and the related accessibility preferences beyond closest distance, the low minimum travel time suggests the potential of inter-municipal mobility, with short travels between contiguous municipalities which could potentially be substituted by more sustainable transportation means (e.g., public transport and biking). In spite of such proximity, the relatively high mode of travel times may signal that residents in Inner Area municipalities have normalised the need for travelling 25 to 30 minutes to reach the SGIs that make up their social practices and mobility patterns.

5. Discussion

The operationalisation of accessibility to SGIs in terms of presence, diversity, and distance allows to appreciate the nuances of peripherality and the relativity of what constitutes a 'central' area in terms of services accessibility. Our contribution to the development policy and regional science literature consists in reframing peripherality and its levels based on accessibility to SGIs. Importantly, the secondary data we accessed are integrated by fieldwork observations and mapping, increasing their representativeness. We in turn identify in the use of OSM data the opportunity to take a methodological positioning for open, free, and community-based data, without limiting our engagement with this data source to an extractivist relationship.

The identification of 'centralities' is based on a constructivist and multi-layered interpretation of accessibility based on the presence, diversity, and distance of services. We contribute to relativistic and contextual approaches to peripherality (Pezzi & Urso, 2017; Pike et al., 2023), by reframing accessibility around the quality of life and habitability conditions of residents. For example, we show that some structural indicators of spatial remoteness, such as distance from centres or altitude, do not necessarily coincide with higher peripherality, as municipalities relatively distant from the main city-hub of L'Aquila still present a good accessibility to SGIs. We therefore assume that higher presence and diversity of services, and their spatial proximity (low distance), can represent a crucial continually evolving determinant of resilience (Martin & Sunley, 2020) that municipalities can capitalise upon to satisfy a wider range of residents' needs and aspirations, and support the establishment of new economic activities, employment opportunities, and eventually the potential relocation of individuals and households.

By analysing services accessibility among a relatively high number of 28 municipalities, we emphasise the need for including multiple spatial scales and governance levels into reframings of peripherality and habitability. The intermunicipal scale emerges as the most promising to restore access to services that require larger user basins to ensure their economic sustainability, especially as municipalities with higher diversity of services also increase the accessibility for neighbouring villages. This argument reinforces the need for place-based development policy to consider welfare systems “in section” (Servillo & Fontana, 2021), i.e., vertically, to account for the functional relations, flows, and mobility of residents both among municipalities with the same altitude and between mountains and valleys. In turn, increasing the motility of residents emerges as a critical contextual condition for exploiting welfare systems at larger spatial scales and across administrative boundaries.

We also offers a detailed, micro-level, and realistic representation of a wide range of services that have been overlooked by SNAI. Our analysis is expansive, as we include as many types as possible of SGIs to explore similarity patterns and differentiation between different types of peripheral areas. A detailed insights on which SGIs are missing from the Inner Area, and its 30-minute isochrone, can further support the identification of interventions to restore service accessibility. SGIs are indeed unevenly distributed, both across municipalities and across (sub)categories. Some of these, such as education services, fuel stations, bus stops, shops, and community centres (within Social facilities), present stark differences based on orography (valley vs. mountain) and presence of mobility infrastructures (railway and highway) in spite of representing critical habitability conditions for any individual and/or household. Although beyond the scope of our research, we believe it is necessary to reconsider which services respond to more pressing conditions for current and future habitability, possibly integrating these needs with higher ones of self-fulfilment, interpersonal relations, community cohesion, and to a more holistic sense of quality of life.

As there is still no consensus on the relative economic relevance across types of SGIs (Delsignore, 2023), we acknowledge that peripheral places may lack the capacity to intervene in restoring their presence due to structural and agentic constraints that concur in their limited capacity to adapt to declining regional development paths (Folke et al., 2010; Bristow & Healy, 2020; de Renzis et al., 2022). While it is important to identify ‘hollow’ (Tantillo, 2023), marginalised, peripheral areas, we recognise the need to allow local communities to define their own needs and aspirations, and hence ground the identification of habitability conditions on specific peripherality contexts or individuals and communities living in peripheral places.

Conclusions

The withdrawal of the welfare state, together with cuts in public expenditure and the subtractive recalibration of welfare systems, exacerbated geographically uneven

development processes (Smith, 1984/2010; Pike et al., 2023) affecting peripheral areas. The result of this progressive peripheralization process consists in a severe lack of, or distance to, a wide range of services, with direct detrimental impacts on the everyday life of local communities and their willingness to stay, return, or arrive in peripheral areas.

In this research, we consider the Italian case of Inner Areas, which are peripheral and mountain areas identified through the place-based SNAI development policy. One of the main contributions of SNAI was the employment of a system of indicators to identify central urban areas as those offering three types of ‘essential’ services (healthcare, education, public transport). Different levels of peripherality were then calculated based on travel-time distance. We argue that a more detailed, multi-layered, and micro-level interpretation of both accessibility to SGIs and peripherality is needed, to understand how accessibility impacts residents’ everyday social practices and the habitability conditions of peripheral municipalities. Building upon a case study design on the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area in the Abruzzo Region, in Italy, we operationalise accessibility in terms of three criteria: the presence of a specific category of services; its diversity in terms of multiple types within the same category; and the distance of services within a 30’ isochrone centred around municipalities in the Inner Area. We access and personally contributed to georeferenced Open Street Map data on a wide range of SGIs for the Inner Area and its hinterland, and employ other open-source tools to analyse their presence, diversity, and distance.

The cartographic and infographic representations of these three dimensions of accessibility, and supporting descriptive statistics, provide a detailed understanding of service accessibility and its impacts on social practices attached to different types of services. Service accessibility is highly heterogeneous across categories and subcategories, as well as among municipalities, providing a more nuanced interpretation of peripherality beyond distance from larger urban and metropolitan areas. We identify services in some municipalities as ‘more accessible’ than others, irrespective of their distance from the Regional capital of L’Aquila, their altitude, or other contextual characteristic such as population size and structural dependency rate. In fact, these factors determine a lower accessibility to SGIs only with respect to the diversity of services and the median travel time to reach them. The presence of SGIs is also highly differentiated with respect to the function of services: those engaged with in everyday social practices (e.g., pharmacies, post offices, shops) are mostly present in each Inner Area municipality, while those related to higher-level needs, such as cinemas, libraries, community and arts centres, higher-level education, bookshops, and socio-psychological care facilities are mostly absent.

We recommend adopting a polycentric and relativistic perspective on services accessibility and peripherality, as some municipalities are already endowed with a wide range of services that could represent better habitability conditions for current and prospective residents. Additionally, we provide a methodological contribution

through the access and contribution to the OSM database, which can ensure the representativeness of secondary data in places where local and regional development include modifications in the build environment and in economic activities, as in the case of post-disaster reconstruction processes.

Improving residents’ mobility systems, even if short-range between contiguous municipalities, could help residents meet everyday needs and satisfy their habitability conditions, irrespective of the services present in the specific municipality they decide to live in. Moreover, we call for a renewed territorial sensitivity and autonomy towards local communities in peripheral areas, which should be able to support or influence access to services that answer to their needs and aspirations.

Endnotes

[1] The three categories of essential services used to identify city-hubs consist in: for education, the presence of at least one high school and a technical/professional institute; for healthcare, the presence of an aggregated set of emergency-treatment functions and admission facilities; and for public transport, the presence of at least one train station with medium-small capacity serving metropolitan-regional and long-distance travelling (DPS, 2021).

[2] For example, in the Italian legislative system, functions of public transport, civil protection, waste management, civil registry, local police, land use planning, and economic development are decentralised to municipal public administrations (comuni) (TUEL, 2023); additionally, municipalities were engaged with in public investigations for problem formulation and agenda setting in SNAI, emphasising their centrality as policy actors (Rossitti et al., 2021).

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Contributions

Andrea Fulgenzi: conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, software, supervision, visualisation, writing.

Paolo Bottero: methodology, software, writing (review and editing)

Gainbi Park: conceptualisation, methodology, visualisation, writing (review and editing)

Rachel Franklin: conceptualisation, writing (review and editing)

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Annex 1: Mapping, categorisation, and cleaning procedure of Open Street Map data

The following annex provides further methodological details onto the access to secondary data from the OSM database. It describes how data were retrieved, their initial dimensions, and the results of the data manipulation and cleaning procedure, while the final section discusses some limitations and suggests future directions to potentially improve the use of OSM data for the analysis of SGI accessibility.

OSM provided data on points of interest (POIs) that represent services of general interest (SGIs). Data were accessed through the Overpass Turbo (overpass-turbo.eu) service following a set of queries detailed in Table A2.1. In total, 10 categories were inductively identified based on both existing literature on the accessibility of proximity services, as well as fieldwork conducted in the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area. Search criteria for each category are based on the OSM Wiki and its classification system based on tags (e.g., `amenity = *`) and keys (e.g., `shop = *`) (cf. Table A2.1). The initial combination of queries resulted in 18,077 POIs divided across 160 subcategories. The total amount of POIs also includes entities that were manually added during fieldwork activity by one of the authors. Specifically, the first retrieval of OSM data for the whole set of tags and keys (as summarised in Tab. A2.1 below) showed gaps in the presence of key amenities such as bars and restaurants, post

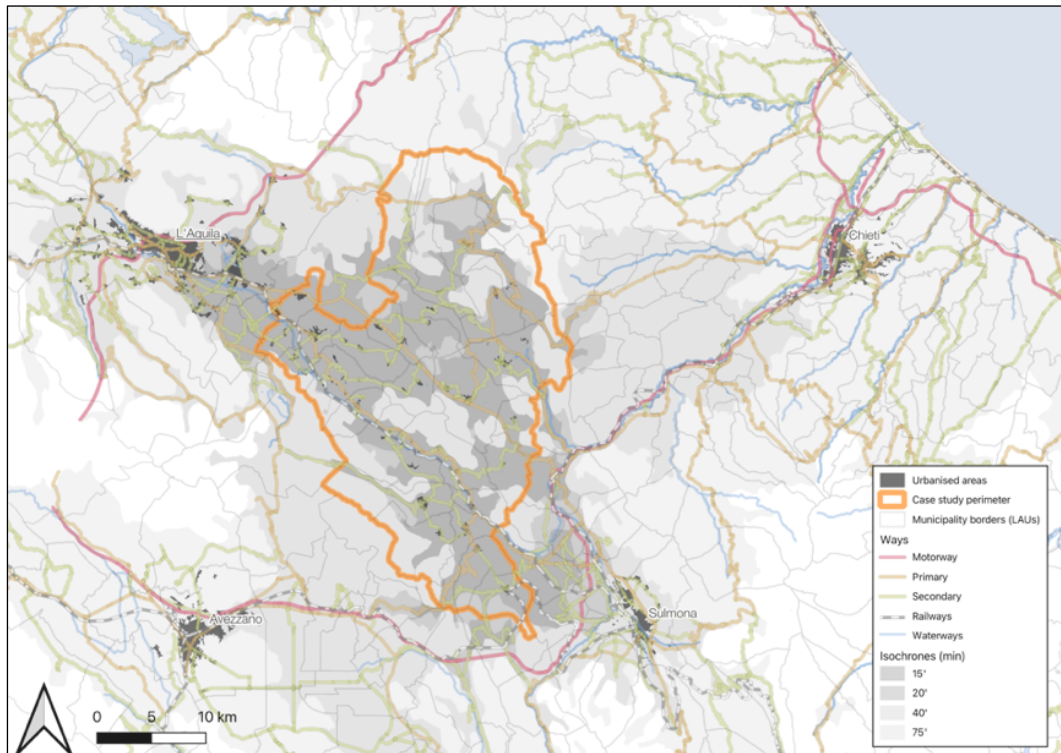


Figure A2.1: Map of the GSVS Inner Area with different travel-time thresholds (all municipalities). Own elaboration on Open Street Map contribution and Open Route Service.

offices, and culture and entertainment facilities. It was only thanks to the existing familiarity with the case study area, as well as with the availability of SGIs (cf. Fulgenzi, 2026) in each municipality, that it was possible to notice that secondary data did not represent current conditions of service accessibility. Among the main reasons behind the unfittingness of secondary data we identified: the outdatedness of edits, with some amenities last updated more than 4-5 years ago; the lack of updating post-earthquake recovery, with some amenities still placed in their pre-disaster location (and hence labelled as dismissed); and the missed update of post-earthquake reconstruction processes, where some amenities have reopened, moved, or added services (e.g., ATMs in post offices) that were previously absent. While the complexity of the OSM digital infrastructure complicates a detailed retrieval of the total number of edits for the whole Abruzzo Region, Figure A2.2 below shows a heatmap of these edits implemented via fieldwork and desk research. It is important to recall that contributions to the OSM database represent a continuous and ongoing task of updating, adding information, modifying, adjusting, and deleting amenities, buildings, streets, and any other cartographic element. It is therefore expected that future reproductions of the data-accessing methods employed in this research would provide different results, opening the possibility of longitudinal analyses on the evolution of services and their mapping.

A series of data-cleaning processes were then applied, first stage of which was the filtering out of POIs laying outside the 75-minute travel time (car driving) isochrone for all municipalities in the Inner Area (Figure A2.1), obtained thanks to a locally hosted Openrouteservice (openrouteservice.org) client. The isochrone is here intended as the union of a 75-minute isochrone for each of the 28 municipalities, meaning that

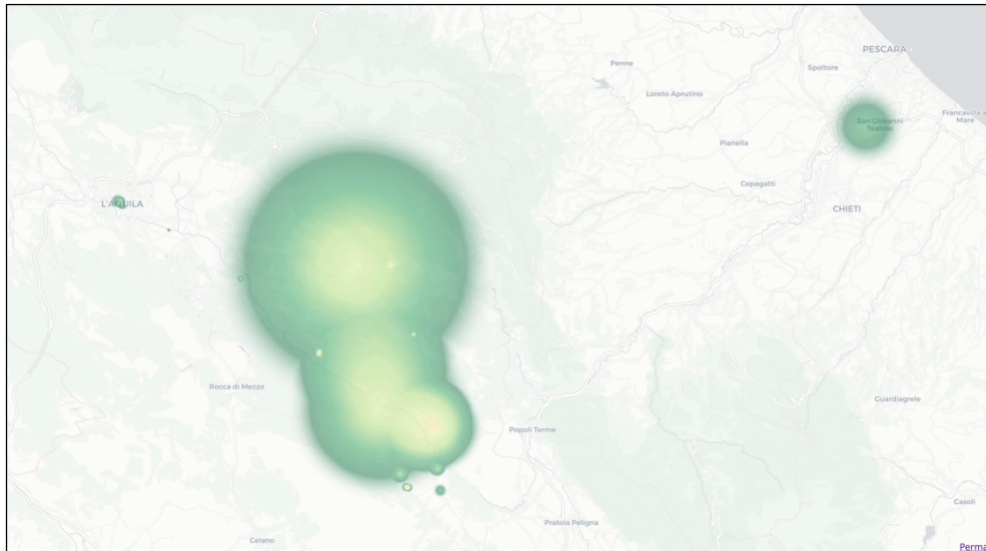


Figure A2.2: Heatmap of the OSM edits applied in the Abruzzo Region, for the year 2026, through the account of the author that engaged in fieldwork and desk research. Own elaboration based on Open Street Map contribution and the How Did You Contribute to OpenStreetMap tool by Pascal Neis (neis-one.org). The map and associated data are available at <https://yosmhm.neis-one.org/?anfulgen> (accessed 01/09/26)

the travel time to reach all POIs could be higher than 75 minutes depending on the relative position of municipalities throughout the Inner Area.

The second stage modified subcategories through merging into more general ones (e.g., hostels and motels within ‘hotels’), aggregation among similar tags (e.g., memorials with ‘monuments’), re-classifications (e.g., psychologists and community centres against gender violence as ‘socio-psychological care’), discarding of unwanted or unrelated classifications (e.g., travel agencies or car rentals), as well as corrections of wrongly assigned categories and/or subcategories. Additionally, some clusters of points with identical categorization were reduced to one POI, mostly for archaeological areas mapped as single POIs for each physical element — often

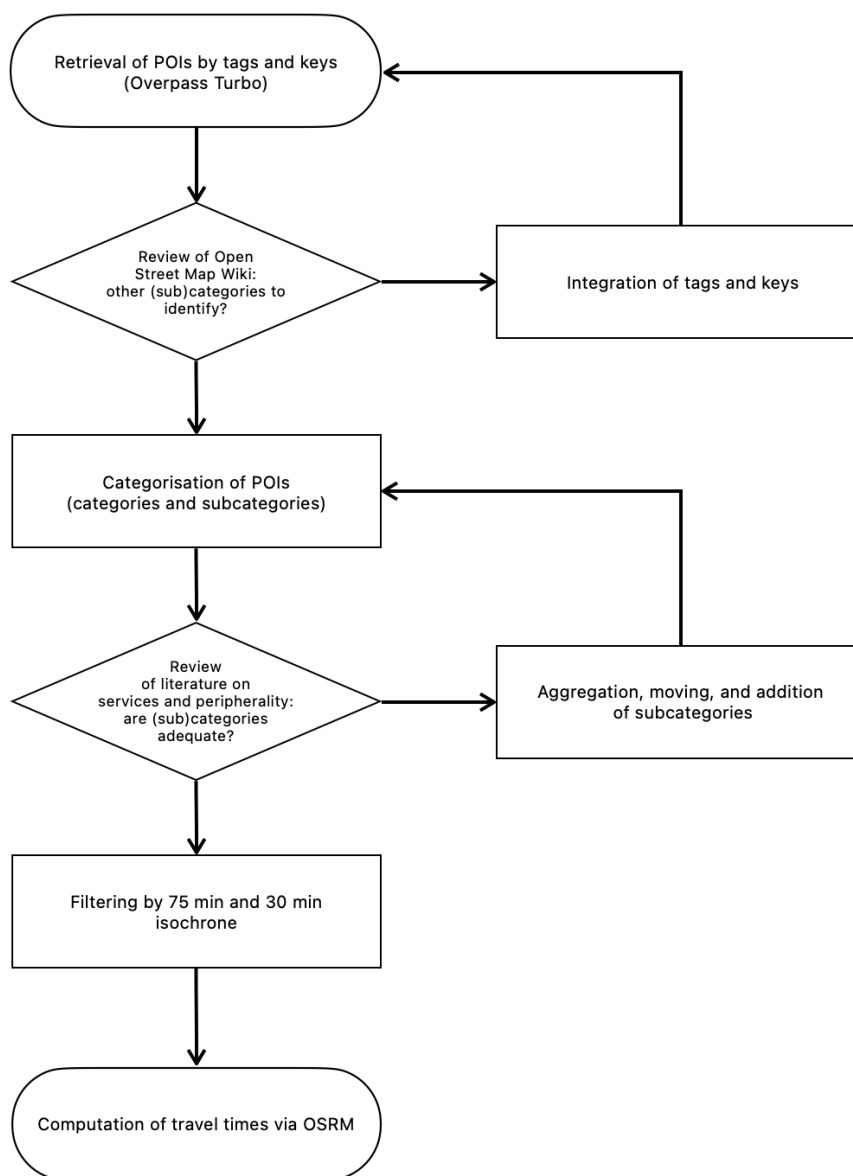


Fig. A2.3: Flowchart of the retrieval and manipulation of Open Street Map data, and the computation of travel times via OSRM.

overlapping with an overlaying POI for the archaeological area itself. Playgrounds (614 POIs) were removed, as they do not represent proximity services per se. Within the Education category, we decided to focus on mandatory education, discarding music, language, flight, and driving schools. At the end of the procedure, represented by the flowchart in Figure A2.2, the map consisted in 12,088 points across 10 categories and 55 subcategories, as summarized in Table A2.2.

Table A2.1: Summary of results from Overpass (based on OSM data) and data-cleaning procedure.

Category Search criteria (query)	Number of POIs		
	Before cleaning	Within 75'	After cleaning
1. Banks and post offices Amenity = ATM, bank, post office	779	496	495
2. Bars and restaurants Amenity = Bar, café, pub, restaurant, fast food	3,645	2,496	2,447
3. Culture and heritage Tourism = Museum, gallery; Historic = Castle, ruins, archaeological site, monument, memorial; Amenity = Theatre, cinema, arts center, library, place of worship.	3,935	2,589	2,415
4. Education Amenity = School, college, university, kindergarten.	712	501	449
5. Fuel stations Amenity = Fuel	638	373	372
6. Healthcare Healthcare = Hospital, physiotherapist, optometrist, laboratory; Amenity = Doctors, clinic, dentist, pharmacy, veterinary.	1,038	696	611
7. Hotels and accommodations Tourism = Hotel, guest house, apartment, hostel, motel, alpine hut	1,047	624	618
8. Public transport Highway = Bus stop; Railway = Station, halt.	2,316	1,838	1,837
9. Shops Shop = Supermarket, convenience, bakery, butcher, clothes, hair-dresser, car repair, doityourself, shoes, books, electronics, furniture, greengrocer, deli, farm, food, grocery, beauty, optician, health food	3,087	2,329	2,305
10. Social facilities Leisure = Sports center, stadium; Amenity = Community center, townhall.	1,469	912	540
Total number of POIs	18,666	12,854	12,088

Travel times via private car driving were calculated via a locally-hosted Open Source Routing Machine (OSRM, project-osrm.org) client. The origin points consisted in the centroid of urbanized areas for each municipality, instead of the whole LAU centroid. We unfortunately could not account for hamlets of 13 municipalities, first because of the heterogeneous orography of the Inner Area (the northern, mountain half characterized denser and unified urbanised areas; the southern, valley half by at least 1-2 hamlets in addition to the urbanized area hosting the townhall). Second, we attempted an alternative conceptualization by defining the origin of travel times as the centroid of the polygon encompassing all hamlets and main urbanised area. However, centroids then often fell outside roads or in inaccessible areas (e.g., agricultural fields, mountains), with a direct influence in travel times — i.e., adding additional time to reach the closest paved road. Therefore, we can only assume travel times for each municipality to be interpreted as a minimum, with smaller and more peripheral hamlets incurring in an even higher travel time.

Table A2.2: Summary of retrieved Open Street Map data for SGI categories and subcategories for the case study Area. Entries with 0 POIs in the first two columns represent merged or reclassified subcategories.

Category	Subcategory	Number of POIs		
		Before cleaning	Within 75'	After cleaning
Banks and post offices	ATM	181	109	109
	Bank	256	174	174
	Post office	342	213	212
Culture and heritage	Archaeological site	120	72	368
	Arts centre	27	19	19
	Castle	292	240	67
	Cinema	26	14	15
	Library	81	45	58
	Monument	219	141	301
	Museum	166	93	78
	Palazzo	0	0	202
	Religious	0	0	1257
	Theatre	83	43	44
	Toy library	5	5	5
Education (ISCED level)	Istituto Comprensivo	0	0	30
	School	519	354	88
	Kindergarten	101	68	104
	Pre-school (0)	0	0	4
	Primary school (1)	0	0	96
	Secondary school I (2)	0	0	36
	Secondary school II (3)	0	0	62
	Professional school (4)	0	0	3
	University (6-8)	0	0	26
Bars and restaurants	Bars and cafes	0	0	988
	Pubs and restaurants	0	0	1459

Table A2.2 (continued): Summary of retrieved Open Street Map data for SGI categories and subcategories for the case study Area. Entries with 0 POIs in the first two columns represent merged or reclassified subcategories.

Category	Subcategory	Number of POIs		
		Before cleaning	Within 75'	After cleaning
Fuelstations	Fuel	638	373	372
Healthcare	Clinic	46	38	51
	Doctors	91	60	118
	Hospital	223	142	138
	Medical lab	0	0	16
	Pharmacy	421	276	276
	Socio-psychological care	0	0	1
	Veterinary	28	16	11
Hotels and accomodation	Agriturismo	0	0	22
	Alpine hut	93	56	61
	Guest house	349	277	291
	Hotel	524	253	244
Public transport	Bus stop	2206	1768	1768
	Train station	4	3	72
Shops	Bakery	195	133	133
	Bookshop	0	0	44
	Clothes	630	493	569
	Convenience store	0	0	143
	DIY	44	24	24
	Electronics	48	36	37
	Food stores	0	0	294
	Furniture	90	78	78
	Mechanic	0	0	190
	Optician	90	72	71
	Personal care	0	0	440
	Supermarket	471	290	282
Social facilities	Community centre	15	12	34
	Sports	453	298	316
	Townhall	327	190	190

CHAPTER 3

The ‘withered’ agency of municipal institutions: the priority-capacity gap in the provision of welfare and services.

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Abstract

Service accessibility is a pivotal issue for ensuring habitability and quality of life in peripheral areas suffering from uneven development outcomes. Despite their organisational thinness and ‘withered’ transformative agency, there is a renewed interest towards the potential of multi-actor and place-based initiatives to reinstate municipal welfare in these areas. The positioning of institutional municipal actors in this narrative is however still complex and uncertain an issue, leading to the need for a micro-level analysis of how and which municipal actors manage to exercise transformative agency for welfare provision, and which governance and/or structural obstacles emerge in relation to different types of services. We employ mixed methods to analyse and map the uneven distribution of proximity services in an Italian Inner Area in the Abruzzo Region (Italy), to then measure the gap between perceived priority of specific services for local and regional development and the capacity of municipal actors to facilitate their accessibility. We finally consider the obstacles to municipal welfare related to specific types of services and their spatial organisation and governance from the perspective of municipal public administrations.

Keywords

Inner Areas – Municipal welfare – Transformative agency –
Services of general interest – Institutional entrepreneurship

1. Introduction

Municipal welfare provision and access to proximity services in peripheral areas constitute a complex challenge that will determine the ‘right to stay’ (Letta, 2024) of residents living in places experiencing geographically uneven development processes and outcomes (Smith, 1984/2010; Pike et al., 2023). The cumulative peripheralization and reproduction of uneven development processes (Tomaney et al., 2024), together with neoliberal and market-oriented policies of welfare restructuring (Connell et al., 2009; Governa, 2014; Clifton et al., 2016; Fiorentino et al., 2024; Tomeo, 2024; Clifton et al., 2026), have contributed to the erosion of welfare and services at the expenses of local communities and municipal governments (A Long-Term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas, 2021; Urso, 2021b; MacKinnon et al., 2022; Royer et al., 2022; Fontana & Servillo, 2024; Tomeo, 2024; MacKinnon et al., 2025). Peripheral areas are afflicted by the interplay of a complex set of pressures and challenges, such as the scarcity of actors that can be engaged with to design, implement, and maintain services; the weakness of institutional agency (Fulgenzi, 2026); as well as spatial-oro-graphic constraints that undermine the feasibility of the material provision of services.

Municipal welfare and service accessibility are nonetheless critical for social infra-structures, economic systems, and institutions, especially as they directly influence quality of life (and attractiveness) for current and prospective residents. In this sense, the ‘right to stay’ strategy very recently adopted by the European Commission emphasises how future Cohesion Policy should improve access to public services and living conditions (Letta, 2024; von der Leyen, 2024). This effort resonates with the call for a “transformative shift” (Martin et al., 2021, p. 109) in local and regional development policy to account for needs-based (MacKinnon et al., 2022) assessments tailored to everyday social practices and quality of life, and to empower municipal actors by improving their capacity for self-governance and implementation of desired solutions. The latter mechanism has however proven to be a problematic question: peripheral places are characterised by a so-called “adaptive inertia, or failure to upgrade and modernise” (Martin & Sunley, 2020, p. 19) — a lack of adaptive capacity (Folke et al., 2010; Bristow & Healy, 2020; de Renzis et al., 2022), or pathological homeostasis (Grabher, 1993). It is hence still unclear how local and regional development policy can improve the capacity of municipal actors in peripheral areas to reinstate municipal welfare and service accessibility. Moreover, the institutional and organisational thinness (Tödtling & Trippel, 2005) of these areas risks hampering any efforts to exercise transformative agency (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020; Fulgenzi, 2026). It is still not clear whether specific types of municipal actors are ‘more capable’ than others to facilitate welfare provision and service accessibility, which types of services are more/less critical for habitability (Grazioli & Urso, 2026); or whether the empowerment of municipal actors should address structural obstacles (e.g., accounting for weak-demand areas) or governance challenges (e.g., redefinition of catchment areas).

The article hence investigates the capacity of municipal actors in peripheral areas to facilitate municipal welfare provision of and access to proximity services. We employ mixed methods in a case study design in an Inner Area of the Abruzzo Region in Italy, to measure and map the uneven distribution of firms, cooperatives, and civil society organisations (CSOs), and to analyse the gap between municipal institutions' prioritisation of different types of services and their capacity to actually improve their accessibility. We contribute to the Economic Geography literature focusing on transformative agency and resilience, by providing a systematic analysis of structural obstacles and governance challenges from the perspective of municipal institutions, and by recontextualising welfare and services as necessary objective of new development paths in peripheral places.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Framing municipal welfare as “right to stay”

Welfare provision is one of the many systems being affected by the continuous and progressive erosion of the social, institutional, and economic structures behind it, a process unfolding especially after the 2008 economic and financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the related austerity measures, cuts in public expenditure, economic efficiency principles and New Public Management (Connell et al., 2009; Governa, 2014; Clifton et al., 2016; Fontana & Servillo, 2024; Fiorentino et al., 2024; Tomaney et al., 2024; Tomeo, 2024; Clifton et al., 2026). In peripheral areas, this impact was exacerbated by ongoing and historical uneven development processes, such as the privatisation and closure of industrial centres, the continuous outmigration of (high-skilled) workforce, and the subtractive recalibration (Carrosio, 2019) of welfare and service provision (Woods, 2005; Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017). The result was increasing socio-economic spatial inequalities and the loss of individual and citizenship rights for residents in peripheral areas, due to the impossibility of choosing where to live and work (Clifton et al., 2016; Tomeo, 2024; Clifton et al., 2026). These territories are commonly considered low-demand areas due to the sheer number of residents, their structural dependency rate, the spatial distance between urban settlements, and low population density (Carrosio, 2019). In turn, services of general interest (SGIs) continue representing ‘market-failure services’ that require institutional intervention for safeguarding the public interest of a local community (Sauter, 2015; Delsignore, 2023).

To address the limited access to welfare and services in peripheral areas, a recent EU-level report by Enrico Letta (2024) emphasised the so-called “freedom to stay” principle, describing how a vicious cycle (brain drain, lack of employment opportunities, loss of services) has a direct impact on the everyday lives of residents in peripheral areas, including poverty, social exclusion, and detrimental standards of living

(see also Lorenzetti, 2024). The report identifies spatial inequalities as the reason behind the necessary relocation of individuals:

The Single Market should empower citizens rather than create circumstances where they feel compelled to relocate in order to thrive. Opportunities must be available for individuals who wish to contribute to the development of their local communities. Free movement is a valuable asset, but it should be a choice, not a necessity. (Letta, 2024, p. 91)

The ‘right to stay’ strategy was also included among the priorities of the 2024-2029 mandate of the European Commission, and it was also brought to the attention of the Executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms, Raffaele Fitto, to stress the relevance of the strategy for local and regional development beyond economic convergence:

You should strive for all citizens to have an effective right to stay in the place they call home by supporting what a community needs: public services and private activities, education and skills, health, transport and digital connectivity. You should tackle regional disparities, providing tailor-made solutions to regional and local challenges and supporting regions to catch up. (von der Leyen, 2024)

Restoring and ensuring access to welfare and services in peripheral areas therefore emerges as a key EU cohesion policy goal, to prevent the reproduction of uneven development processes across multiple spatial and temporal scales, especially by empowering local actors and restoring habitability conditions. This type of place-based approach resonates with relational and agency-based (Pezzi & Urso, 2017; Pike et al., 2023; Grazioli & Urso, 2026) approaches to local and regional development. The inherent aim is to expand the system of actors engaged in welfare and service provision, while accounting for their ‘territoriality’ and promoting an adaptive recalibration of welfare — one that re-defines service catchment areas while safeguarding accessibility for local communities (Carrosio, 2019). The long-term objective of restoring access to welfare and services is hence transformative in nature, as it creates new regional development paths while facilitating a radical and systemic change among regional development actors — including double-loop and self-reflective learning, reflexive governance (Grabher, 1993; Jessop, 2021), and the reframing of the rationales and value systems behind decisions and actions (Martin & Sunley, 2020).

2.2 Challenges and failures of welfare and service provision in peripherality

The ‘right to stay’ narrative aligns with place-based approaches to regional development policy that support the empowerment of local actors and the attention to their needs and aspirations (MacKinnon et al., 2022). The relevance and autonomy of local actors are also central in the concept of community welfare, or ‘second welfare’ (Fontana & Servillo, 2024). Such labelling derives from its definition: second welfare includes social policies guaranteed by non-public, non-institutional actors, such as firms, families, civil-society and non-governmental organisations —hence ‘second’

to State-based provision; it is 'temporally second' to the welfare state constructed during the 20th century; and it is financed by non-public resources (Ferrera & Maino, 2014). Second welfare seems highly relevant to peripheral areas, as it conveys a commoning (Papa et al., 2025), cooperative, community-based perspective that directly impacts the institutions and governance arrangements that shape welfare provision (Fontana & Servillo, 2024). Existing literature has, in fact, long emphasised how community-based organisations, collective social movements, as well as public-private partnerships have proven to be successful experiments to facilitate local and regional development and service accessibility (e.g., Ahlbrandt & Sumka, 1983; Percy, 1984; Joshi & Moore, 2004; Nilsen et al., 2022; Lorenzetti, 2024). More recent examples include bottom-up initiatives that started as, or relied on, a form of community activism (Carrosio, 2019). Similarly, residents have come together into community cooperatives, representing a crucial municipal actor that can provide services to residents and new employment opportunities for its members (Pezzi & Urso, 2018; Teneggi, 2018/2020; Spalazzi & Curciarello, 2023; Sforzi et al., 2024).

Welfare and service provision in peripheral areas nonetheless continues bearing several challenges. Within the legislative framework of the European Union, the provision of SGIs remains subject to the principles of market openness and free competition among firms (Delsignore, 2023). We identify two main issues from this tension between a public interest fulfilled by a public administrative actor, and an entrepreneurial activity performed by a private one. First is an administrative mismatch: the uncertainty of which specific services can be reassigned under a public interest, does not necessarily lead to a devolution of service provision to a municipal public administration, which is expected to be the closest to community needs and interests. Second is a functional ambiguity, as it is unclear whether the presence of a market failure is enough to reorganise welfare provision, and hence reclassify one or more services under a 'public' domain. Collective or community-based reconfigurations of welfare and services in turn depend on local actors' capacity to mobilise resources, knowledge, and competences, who may not possess the capacity to co-create these governance arrangements in a given area.

In peripheral areas, the collective and multi-actor system of welfare and services that emerges from the 'right to stay' narrative seems at odds with the issue of organisational thinness (Tödtling & Tripl, 2005), which represents the low co-operation and clustering of local actors, and the weakness of the institutions they are embedded in. Peripheral areas often consist in SMEs active in 'traditional' or low-productivity sectors (Tödtling & Tripl, 2005), in institutional actors with low administrative capacity, and they are generally characterised by the lack of an entrepreneurial culture (Fulgenzi 2026) that can support entrepreneurial innovation. Peripheral areas are also characterised by a low differentiation of actors, which prevents the access to and mobilisation and recombination of resources; by skewed power relations, which lead to unequal capacity and/or legitimisation of actors' strategies; and by the lack or scarcity

of regional development actors altogether (Weber & Rohrer, 2012; Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020; Nilsen et al., 2022). It is therefore unclear which type of actors can be engaged with, and whether these arrangements strengthen the collective agency (cf. Battilana et al., 2009) needed to co-design and implement re-territorialised forms of welfare and services.

2.3 Institutional agency for municipal welfare

The regional innovation studies literature has offered useful perspectives on the operationalisation of collective agency, and on its relevance for new path creation. Specifically, Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020) have described change agency as the purposive and intentional actions of specific regional development actors, with their intended or unintended consequences. Here innovative entrepreneurship, institutional entrepreneurship, and place-based leadership represent three types of actors that can exercise related dimensions of agency. Differently from human agency, this type of transformative agency (cf. Fulgenzi, 2026) entails an intentional and meaningful directionality towards more sustainable futures (Trippel et al., 2024), and it therefore represents a determinant for the establishment of new development paths. Among the three types of actors, the present research focuses on institutions and their organisational representations (Boyd & Folke, 2012; Zukauskaitė et al., 2017) at the municipal level, as embodying a potentially pivotal role for the reconfiguration of welfare and services in peripheral areas.

Institutions have been generally defined as the ‘rules of the game’ that govern, organise, and can stimulate economic activity (Lowndes, 1996; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Zukauskaitė et al., 2017). Their importance for facilitating regional path development is undisputed, and it is often interpreted through arguments according to which ‘better’ or ‘higher-quality’ institutions lead to ‘better-off’ regions (MacKinnon et al., 2002; Gertler, 2010; Boyd & Folke, 2012; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Syssner, 2016; Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose & Ketterer, 2020; Isaksen et al., 2022). Existing regional development literature has, however, mostly focused on structures at regional and/or national level, at the expenses of micro-scale analyses of agency, and of the motivations, rationales, and meanings behind the actions and strategies of institutions (Sotarauta & Suvinen, 2018). Moreover, most evolutionary analyses of transformative agency rely on retrospective and ex-post reconstructions of transformative agency, while addressing ongoing challenges and obstacles could provide actionable insights on which determinants and contextual (pre)conditions can facilitate pathbreaking and path creation.

Additional considerations motivate the foregrounding of municipal institutions. First, institutional agency can overlap with both place-based leadership (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020) and quasi-entrepreneurial activities (cf. Mazzucato, 2014). Second, municipal institutions possess a political and administrative mandate which (usually) grants them the position and legitimacy to mobilise and recombine resources at different

governance levels (Nilsen et al., 2022) — including experimenting with and participating to the construction of new institutional configurations, including self-governance practices (Ubels et al., 2019; Leonardi, 2024). Third, they represent collective instances and a public, democratic function of ensuring the well-being of their communities, often embodying in their representatives the sense of responsibility towards local and regional development within and beyond their administrative boundaries (Fulgenzi, 2026). Municipal institutions also have the opportunity to address the cognitive, political, and socio-organisational challenges that reproduce transformational failures (Weber & Rohrer, 2012; Fulgenzi, 2026) and political lock-ins (Grabher, 1993).

Several examples portray a proactive role of municipal institutions to facilitate the emergence and establishment of new development paths. Some of these affect welfare and services, such as remunicipalised or inter-municipalised arrangements (Pirani, 2019; Leggero, 2024; Leonardi, 2024). Others rely on social innovation, community-organising, energy transition practices, or proximity healthcare (Carrosio, 2019; Barbera & De Rossi, 2021; Spadano, 2024). These institutional actions also bring the added benefit of reframing the role of municipal institutions: they deconstruct extractivist institutions (Carrosio, 2019), which preclude the possibility of other types of actors to participate in decision-making processes; and they portray peripheral areas as living-labs (e.g., Zavratnik et al., 2019; Schaffers & Astorga, 2010), or laboratories with controlled variables, which allow further experimentation with place-based and collective arrangements for welfare and service provision.

Against this complex backdrop, we argue that municipal actors in peripheral areas operate under conditions of what we may term 'withered agency'. Rather than describing a mere lack of agency, a feature in some instances attached to these territories, we interpret it as a progressive erosion of the capacity of local institutions to translate local community needs, priorities and aspirations into effective action due to long-term, cumulative uneven development processes (welfare retrenchment, austerity measures, administrative underfunding, rescaling against a structural context of demographic decline and shrinkage). While municipal administrations remain formally in charge of ensuring their community's well-being and are often held responsible for it by local communities, being the more proximate institutions, they frequently lack the financial resources, regulatory autonomy, organisational capacity, or decision-making power to address their needs. Building on this perspective, we operationalise withered agency — the mismatch between what local institutions deem as necessary to sustain habitability and quality of life in their territory and their ability to ensure them — through the concept of a 'priority-capacity gap', identified through the distance between the priority assigned by municipal actors to a specific service category and their capacity to provide it. The larger the gap, the greater the withering of institutional agency and its potential transformative role.

In the present research, we analyse this critical but challenging role of municipal institutions in peripheral areas, in between organisational thinness and low

differentiation of actors, on the one hand, and their embodiment of transformative agency through the reconfiguration of municipal welfare and SGIs accessibility, on the other. We analyse the composition and power relations of actors engaged in welfare provision and SGIs' accessibility, and we contextualise these dimensions within the structural, organisational, and governance obstacles and challenges that hamper institutional transformative agency. The research is applied to a specific peripheral context of mountain municipalities affected by geographically uneven development outcomes and processes, which is presented in the following section.

3. Design and methods

We employ mixed methods in a case study design to analyse how municipal institutions attempt to facilitate the reconfiguration of municipal welfare provision and SGIs accessibility. We first analyse actor composition by mapping the distribution of non-institutional actors that provide different types of SGIs and 'second welfare'. Then, we ask how transformative agency is (tentatively) exercised through municipal institutions, whether it relies on collective and multi-actor arrangements, which structural or governance challenges emerge hampering its effectiveness, and which opportunities for transformative resilience arise from potential reconfigurations of municipal welfare. We do so by integrating interview data with a support questionnaire measuring the gap between the priority attached by municipal institutions to different types of welfare and SGIs and their capacity to facilitate their provision.

3.1 Case study

We designed the research around a case study in the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area in the Abruzzo Region, Italy, a peripheral, predominantly mountain area involved in a research partnership between Italian universities and peripheral municipalities.^[1] It is one of the 72 pilot project areas identified^[2] by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne, SNAI) in 2014 to implement place-based policies for local and regional development, addressing depopulation, ageing, lack of economic opportunities, accessibility to services, and valorisation of natural and cultural heritage, among other objectives (Lucatelli & Tantillo, 2020; DPS, 2021). Peripheral, inner-mountain areas in Italy have long witnessed progressive dismantling of the welfare state and the onset of slow-burn pressures (Pendall et al., 2010; Pezzi & Urso, 2017) brought about by geographically uneven development processes. As first explicitly place-based policy for local and regional development in peripheral areas, the SNAI policy promoted the establishment of new intermunicipal arrangements collecting municipalities with similar characteristics and marginalisation issues (DPS, 2021; Rossitti et al., 2021). Distinctive of the SNAI policy narrative is the multi-actor nature of institutional geographies and designed initiatives and investment projects, where

citizens, civil society organisations, entrepreneurs, and public administrative actors come together (in different configurations and engagement levels) building upon shared principles and values ensuring the protection and sustainability of local economic systems, including welfare provision and service accessibility (Leggero, 2024).

As represented in Figure 3.1, the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area is located on the eastern side of the province of L'Aquila, Regional capital, and it is bounded by the Gran Sasso mountain range to the north and the Sirente-Velino one to the south. The Area comprises a vast territory (700 ca. km²) of mountain and valley municipalities with an exceptionally low population density — 17.5 residents/km² against a Regional and national average of 67.3 and 75.7, respectively. In 2020, the Area consisted in 24 municipalities, to which 4 were added in the new financing programme 2021-2027, and one more was eventually included by instruction of the Abruzzo Region in 2025, for a total of 29 municipalities (Dipartimento per le Politiche di Coesione, 2025). All municipalities have experienced severe depopulation since 1911, with an average decrease in the number of residents of 72% since the first official national census of 1861, reaching up to 95-97% for some more peripheral mountain municipalities. In 2020 an Area Strategy for local and regional development was drafted, which allocated 7.5 million € across 28 initiatives and project activities related to education (1.05m €), healthcare (1.2m €), mobility (1.1 m €), agricultural and forestry resources (0.6 m €), tourism (1.8m €), employment and the social economy (1.1m €), and associative processes and governance (0.44m €) (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2020). In 2023 and 2024, two Unioni di Comuni (Combined Authorities) were established to reorganise and transform the previous Comunità Montane (Consortia of Mountain Municipalities). The short-term objective of these newly established governance arrangements is to collectively manage social services for participating municipalities.

3.2 Accessed data

We first measure the presence and distribution of different types of actors, and the type of 'second welfare' they represent. Secondary data from official ministerial databases on cooperatives and civil society organisations (CSOs), and from the Orbis database on firms, allow us to map all actors registered either in one of the 28 case-study municipalities, or reachable within a 30-minute drive.^[3] To some extent, it is possible to identify the type of service these actors represent based on different sources: NACE activity codes for firms and cooperatives; category and subcategory of social cooperatives;^[4] and actor name for CSOs,^[5] as well as cooperatives without a NACE activity code. Table 3.1 provides an overview of these actors, while Annex 1 includes further details on their manipulation, filtering (cf. Tab. A3.2), and identification of services categories.

We then map the presence and distribution of firms, cooperatives, and CSOs relative to the number of municipal residents to identify the municipalities with the

highest number of each type of actor per 100 residents. As described in Tab. 3.2, the three municipalities with the highest relative density of actors are all located in the northern boundary of the Inner Area, below the Gran Sasso mountain range (S. Stefano di Sessanio, Calascio, Carapelle Calvisio). We therefore introduce a location-based differentiation to increase the representativeness of municipalities from which primary data were accessed, based on the subdivision by Aree Omogenee (Homogeneous Areas) — established to identify socio-economic, orographic, and institutionally similar municipalities to organise and implement post-earthquake reconstruction and recovery efforts. As these subdivisions include municipalities both within and outside the SNAI Inner Area, we measured the relative density of actors for only Homogeneous Areas that included 3 or more municipalities — expecting one municipality per type of actor, while allowing for at most one municipality showing high relative density in two actor categories simultaneously. Following this rationale, we decided to exclude Homogeneous Area #5 as it accounts for only two municipalities within the Inner Area. In the cases of Areas #6 and #7, two municipalities presents the highest relative density of both firms and cooperatives.

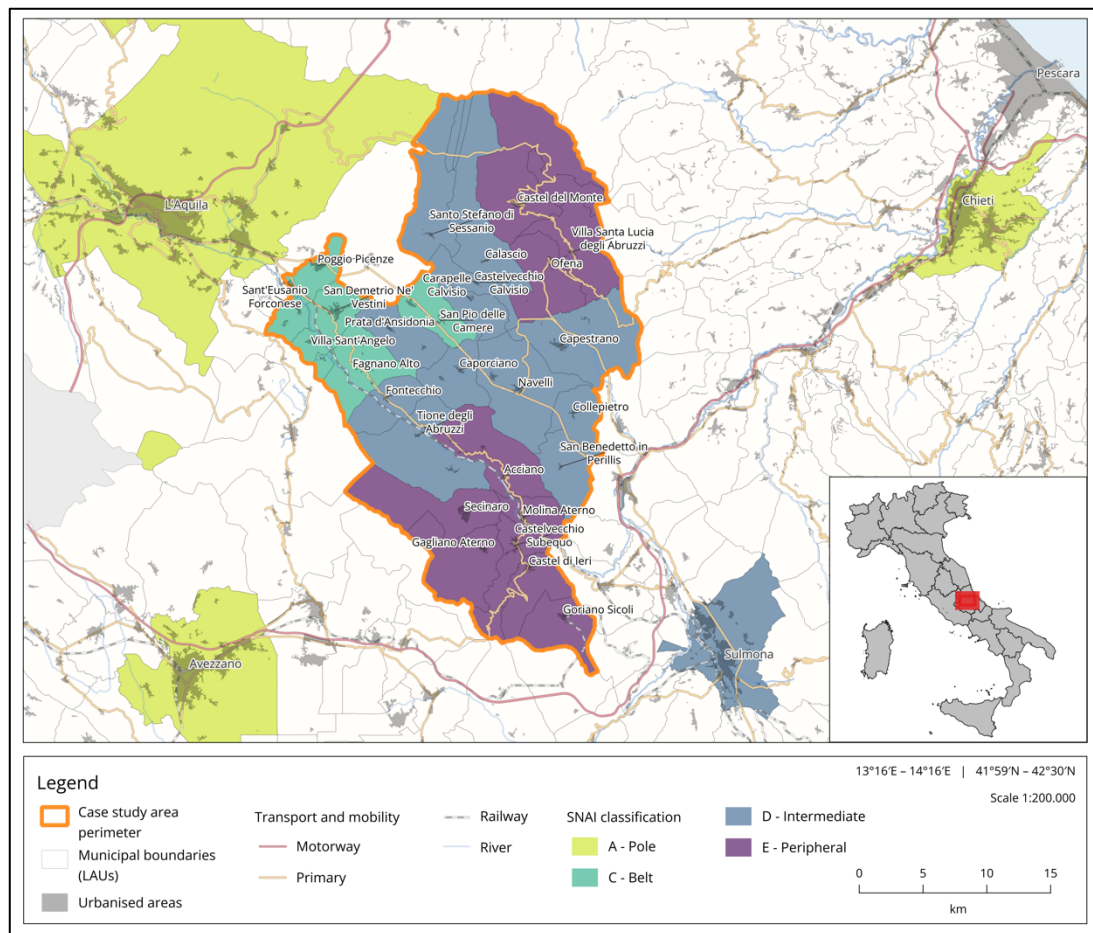


Figure 3.1: The Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana case study Inner Area, with SNAI peripherality classification level. Own elaboration from Open Street Map contributions and Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale (2020).

Table 3.1: Municipalities selected as questionnaire respondents, based on total number of actors (relative to 100 residents). The number of municipalities next to each Homogenous Area shows how many municipalities are included within the Inner Area perimeter. Number of residents for each municipality relative to 2025, based on ISTAT data.

Scale	Actor type		
	Cooperatives	CSOs	Firms
Inner Area (28 municipalities)	Calascio	Carapelle Calvisio	S. Stefano di Sessanio
Area 4 (5 municipalities)	Calascio (1.6 actors, 122 residents)	Carapelle Calvisio (1.4 actors, 70 residents)	S. Stefano di Sessanio (31.4 actors, 105 residents)
Area 6 (7 municipalities)	Navelli (3 actors, 567 residents)	S. Benedetto in Perillis (1 actor, 100 residents)	Navelli (12.5 actors, 567 residents)
Area 7 (6 municipalities)	Castel di Ieri (2 actors, 284 residents)	Secinaro (1 actor, 299 residents)	Castel di Ieri (12.3 actors, 284 residents)
Area 8 (8 municipalities)	Fontecchio (3 actors, 280 residents)	Tione degli Abruzzi (0.8 actors, 253 residents)	Fagnano Alto (9.8 actors, 336 residents)

By combining the three types of actors with these four Homogenous Areas, we identified a total of 10 unique municipalities with the highest number of actors per 100 residents, listed in Table 3.2. It is important to recall that, through the secondary data we employed, we only account for actors that completed their registration in official directories — especially relevant for CSOs, which in our case does not account for informal groups of residents, such as events committees. On the other hand, we include any other actor with a registered office within the municipality, although its operational headquarter could be elsewhere.

To analyse the transformative agency exercised by municipal institutions to facilitate the restructuring of welfare and SGIs, we engage in semi-structured interviews with the 10 municipalities listed in Table 3.2. The choice of this sample is intended to ensure as much as possible the fittingness (Schwartz-Shea, 2006) of the resulting overview on the presence and agency of municipal actors in different spatial contexts. We invited the mayor of each of these 10 municipalities to participate in the research, with the aim of accessing the embodied experiences, perceptions, knowledge, and perspectives of municipal public administrations, as well as the strategies (and their consequences) they employed or experimented with, irrespective of their success or failure. Before taking part in the interview, each respondent provided explicit written consent to participate and to be recorded; the research framework was presented, together with how accessed information would have been used; and we offered the opportunity to ask clarifying questions, pause the recording, or withdraw from the interview. Each of the 10 interviews that we carried out lasted on average 50 minutes, it was mostly carried out in the premises of the town hall, and it was recorded and transcribed in Italian, and anonymised.

Each interview began with a general introduction on the topic of accessibility to welfare and SGIs for the respective municipality and surrounding territory. Each participant shared their perceptions, experiences, concerns, and risks, as well as opportunities arising from incumbent local and regional development policies or attempted strategies to increase or (re-)ensure access to welfare and services. Each mayor commented on the secondary data on the density of firms, cooperatives, and CSOs, presented by the researcher in both absolute and relative terms (cf. Fig. 3.2). The first semi-structured question asked mayors to describe the obstacles to service accessibility and municipal welfare provision for their municipality and territory.

To improve comparability among responses and the specificity of accessed information, we relied on a supporting online questionnaire consisting of a prioritisation of items and a mapping exercise (cf. Annex 2). As for the first, each participant rearranged a set of 6 randomly-sorted obstacles to service accessibility, identified from literature and policy documents on Inner Areas: distance from larger cities, distance from service providers in the area (*presidi*), lack of essential services (hospital, school, and public transport, as defined by SNAI), lack of proximity services and SGIs (e.g., shops, culture, accommodations, bars and restaurants, doctors), opening hours, quality of services. Up to three one-sentence summaries of accessibility issue(s) mentioned in the first semi-structured question were included in this list, for a total number of obstacles ranging from 6 to 9. The position value (ranked order) of each list item is then inverted (higher values to higher importance) and normalised for statistical comparison. Some respondents considered certain list items irrelevant or not applicable to their municipality and/or area, and a value of 9 (i.e., lowest priority) was uniformly assigned to these “non-priority” items. In the following mapping exercise, each mayor mapped 10 SGI categories along two axes, representing the priority of each type of service and their own capacity to influence its accessibility — based on their perceptions, specialised knowledge, experience as individuals and public administrators, and lessons learned from past, ongoing, or attempted initiatives to facilitate service accessibility. The 10 categories, namely healthcare, shops, education, fuel station, accommodation capacity, bars and restaurants, banks and post offices, public transport, social functions, and culture, were inductively identified from a previous study on SGI accessibility (cf. Chapter 2, §3.2). Interviewees assigned each type of service a position along the two axes. We then quantitised the resulting priority-capacity combination for each type of service through a graduated grid, and we then computed median scores for each SGI and compared these across service categories and municipalities.

4. Results

The following sections present the analysis of the composition of municipal actors engaging in second welfare provision, mapping the distribution of firms, cooperatives, and CSOs across the 28 case-study municipalities and their 30-minute driving isochrone.

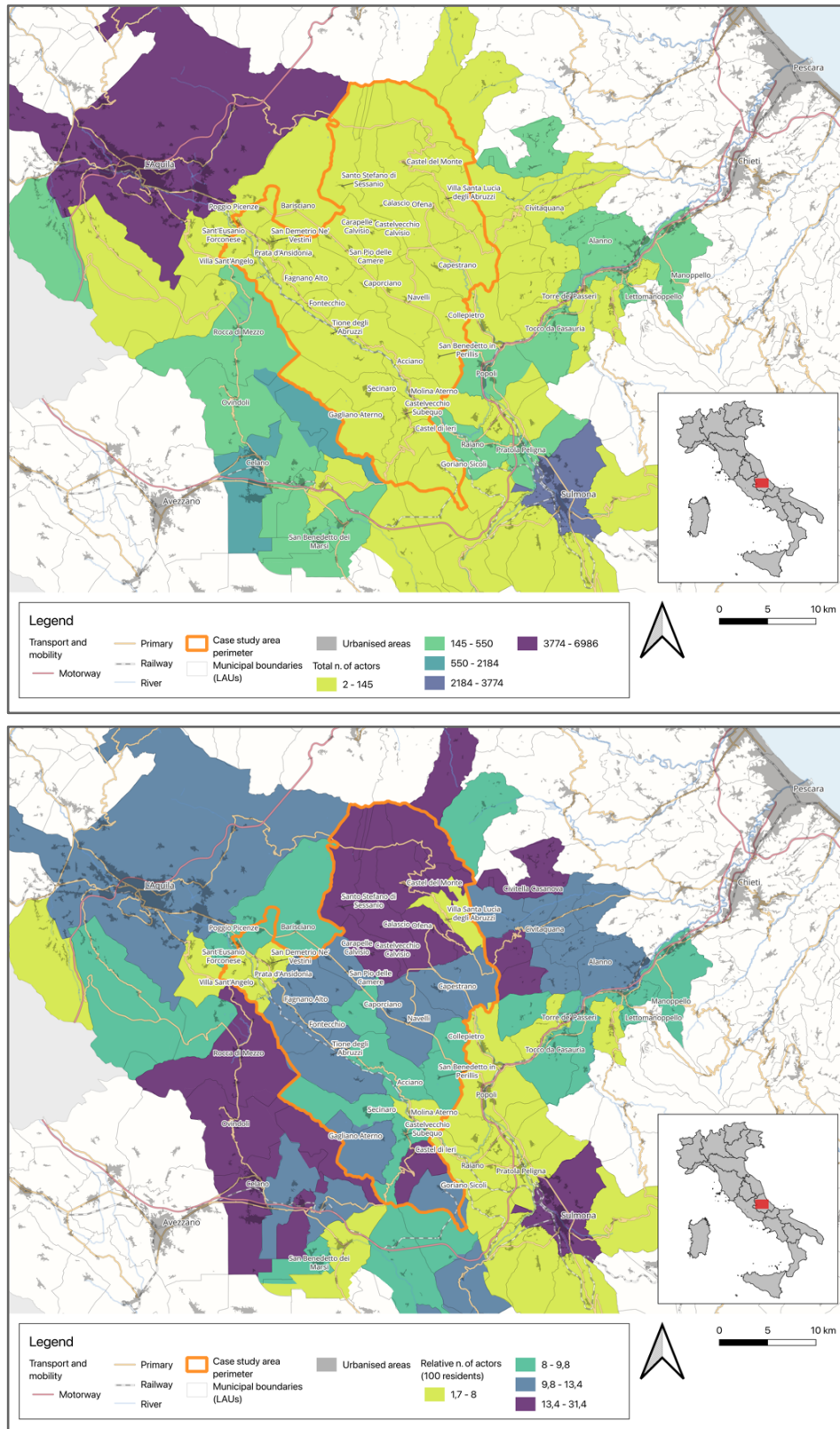


Figure 3.2: Total number of actors (firms, cooperatives, CSOs) in Inner Area municipalities and within their 30' isochrone, absolute values (top) and per 100 residents (bottom). Own elaboration on MIMIT, MLPS, and Moody's data and Open Street Map contributions.

4.1 Uneven distribution of municipal actors and services

The composition and distribution of municipal actors are significantly uneven, with a pronounced polarisation in the Regional Capital of L'Aquila (6,986 entities), followed by Sulmona (1,887) and Celano (1,092). As shown in Figure 4.1, a substantial difference in the absolute numbers of actors emerges in its cartographic representation between larger cities and all municipalities in the Inner Area, in a relatively equal way, irrespective of their distance from the Regional capital.

Some groups of municipalities outside the Inner Area perimeter also show relatively high numbers of firms, cooperatives, and CSOs (in absolute terms). One group is located south-west of the Inner Area and includes Ovindoli (197 entities) and Rocca di Mezzo (185), the municipalities located in the Altopiano (plateau) delle Rocche traditionally specialised in winter tourism and the closest ski areas to Rome (around 1.5 hours by private car). A second group lies adjacent to Sulmona (Pratola Peligna, 537; Raiano, 208); and a third is located along the highway connecting Pescara with Rome.

We have around 70 registered entrepreneurs here, but only around 10 of them live and stay here. The other 60 do exist but they are commuters. [...] There is something going wrong with 115 residents and 70 entrepreneurs. [...] We have another problem related to the lack of accommodation: [...] commuting to our municipality is stronger than commuting outside (living here and working elsewhere), and basically any entrepreneurial activity struggles to find accommodation for their employees. My explanation of this anomaly is that a sort of 'business' for tourists came about, and people do not understand that workers are not tourists. [...] Rents go up, asking 500€ per month — and at that point you would rather live in L'Aquila. I would like to focus on this problem, because I am sure that other villages will face it in a few years. (M3, 10/04/2026)

In this case, the high relative density of firms is put in its right perspective: the abundance of these actors does not translate into an actual increase in proximity services for residents; almost all these firms are related to tourism accommodations and related tourism services, such as restaurants; and their concentration led to the unintended consequence of decreased accessibility to housing within the municipality.

With respect to the specific type of actor, secondary data show a disproportionate number of firms relative to cooperatives and CSOs, both in absolute and relative terms (cf. Fig. 3.2 and Appendix 1 for a breakdown of metrics per actor type, before and after data cleaning and processing). Looking at the type of firms registered in Inner Areas municipalities and their 30-min isochrone, we confirm the picture of mostly SMEs in low-productivity sectors: almost half of all firms are sole proprietorships (48.5%), while most represented sectors include retail (45.6%), food and beverage (16.4%), and personal care (15.3%) — e.g., hairdressing, pharmacies, beauty treatments.

An uneven distribution of these municipal actors also emerges when comparing actor types (Figure 3.2). Cooperatives are the most unevenly distributed, being absent from 14 Inner-Area municipalities, and with the lowest number of actors per residents. Among the 23 cooperatives registered within the Inner-Area municipalities, 4 community

cooperatives (Cooperative di Comunità) emerge: in the municipality of Calascio (122 residents in 2025), Castel del Monte (383), Castel di Ieri (284), and in the hamlet of Goriano Valli (in the municipality of Tione degli Abruzzi, 253 residents). With respect to the 30-minute isochrone, secondary data show that almost 80% of cooperative activity is related to work and economic production, 12.5% to social services, and 4.2% to agriculture and livestock. Some of these show a similar sectoral composition to firms: 16.7% in restaurants and mobile food services, 12.6% in retail, 12.5% in education, 8.4% in food wholesale, tourism accommodation services, and social work.

4.2 The priority-capacity gap in municipal welfare

After analysing the uneven distribution of actors and their function as proximity service providers, we focus on the 10 municipalities with the highest relative number of registered actors per residents. The first part of this analysis involves interpreting how mayors mapped the gap between the priority assigned to SGIs and their capacity to facilitate access to them. As summarised in Figure 3.4, using the same visual representation employed in the mapping exercise, the distribution of priorities and capacity scores appears skewed or concentrated in the bottom-right quadrant (high priority – low capacity). During the interviews, some mayors explained how they assigned a low or no priority to the specific services already present in their municipality:

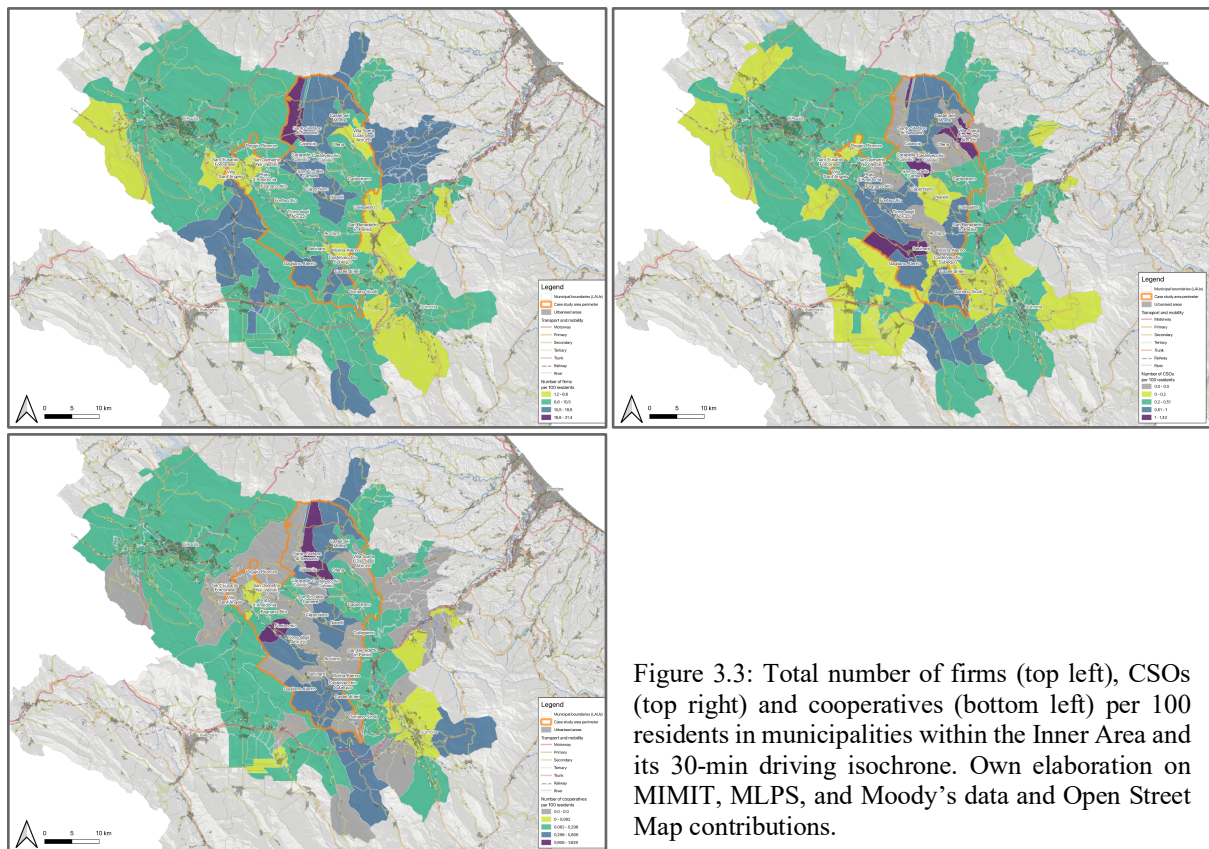


Figure 3.3: Total number of firms (top left), CSOs (top right) and cooperatives (bottom left) per 100 residents in municipalities within the Inner Area and its 30-min driving isochrone. Own elaboration on MIMIT, MLPS, and Moody's data and Open Street Map contributions.

I can't complain about the service we have. We have no bank but there's a postal office, which is a pseudo-bank anyway and it's open three days a week. And we're quite fine with that. [...] We have a kindergarten, primary, and secondary school in [the neighbouring municipality], which is 11 km, a 10-minute drive. (M4, interview transcript 14/04/26)

We also observe that one municipality exhibits a negative priority-capacity gap. This apparent 'over-capacity' can be interpreted by considering the above-mentioned mayors' tendency to assign low priority to services already present in their municipality. Demographic data (cf. Tab. 3.2) seem to confirm this interpretation, as this municipality has a relatively large population and has experienced the lowest rate of depopulation over the last 10 years.

Service categories with the highest priority-capacity gap are Healthcare, Education, and Shops, although their respective priority and capacity scores vary considerably among mayors. All mayors assigned a relatively high priority to healthcare (from 0.5 to 1), as expected by virtue of the demographic structure of their residents (on average, 72 residents every 100 are aged below 15 or above 65) and the high public relevance of this type of service — the high travel time (30-50 min) of an ambulance from the closest hospital to municipalities in Inner Areas is interpreted as the loss of a crucial

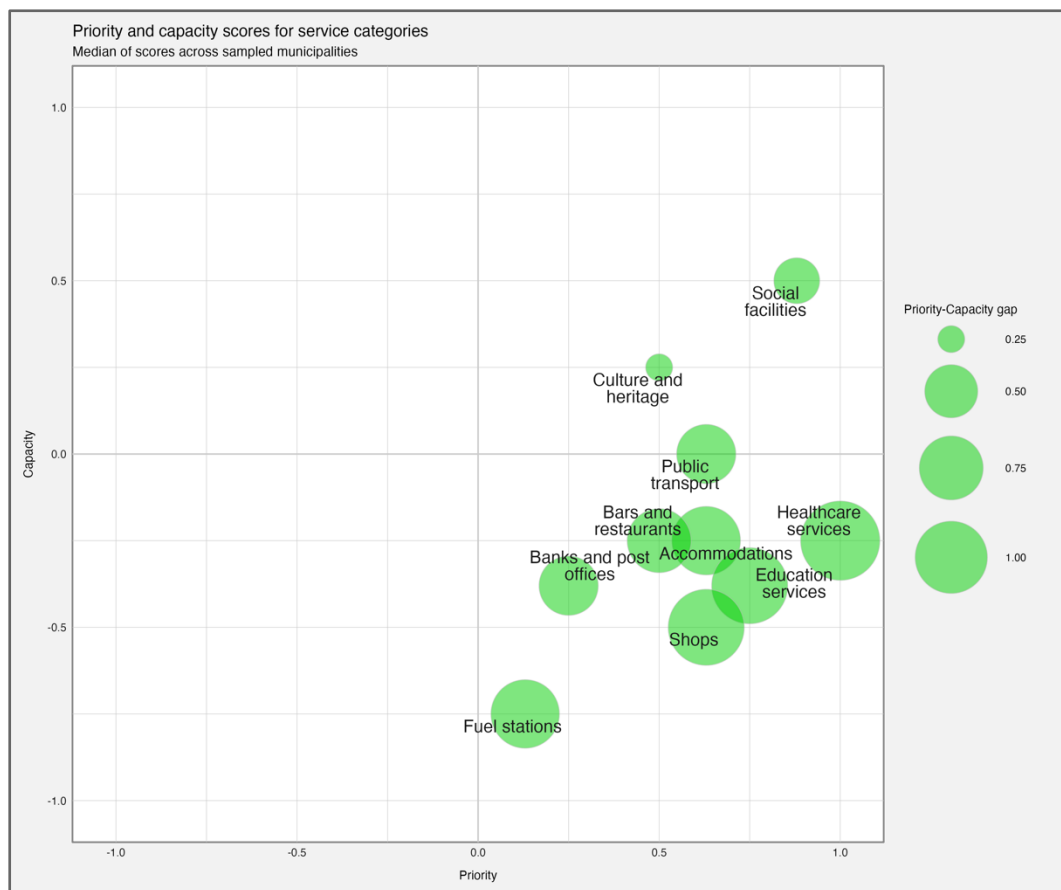


Figure 3.4: Medians of the priority and capacity scores for the 10 service categories. Size of the bubble reflects the magnitude of the difference between the two scores. Own elaboration.

basic citizenship right. On the other hand, only 4 mayors assigned a positive score to capacity for healthcare, as in general the organisation of this type of service is considered a top-down decision taken at a higher administrative level, either by the Regional government or by the local healthcare management system — referred to in Italy as ‘local healthcare firm’ (Azienda Sanitaria Locale, ASL). The perception of low capacity also arises from witnessing the progressive reduction of healthcare services in the area — which led, for example, to the downgrading of the city of Sulmona from city-hub/centre to a peripheral city after the loss of some first aid emergency services in the local hospital (cf. DPS, 2021). A slightly different picture concerns doctors, and general practitioners (GPs) in particular, who are not replaced once they reach retirement age:

We suffered a drastic cut after the GP retired, and they followed us for many years. We had to ask loudly to safeguard having a new doctor coming to our offices, and we only got some crumbs: then we had a doctor at least once a week, now we brought it down to once a month. But we are still grateful to be able to ensure this minimum level of service for a territorial healthcare unit. (M6, 15/04/26)

Another mayor described the priority-capacity gap in healthcare as “the frustration of not being able to directly intervene in emergencies and pressing matters” (M1, 30/03/26). The feeling emerges from the perceived distance between the everyday distresses that major experience, also considering the close social ties and interpersonal interactions with residents, and the higher-level decisions or administrative procedures that need to be rectified or dismissed by the municipal administration. On the other hand, healthcare was depicted as highly connected to the social functions category, which ranked as the second-lowest gap. All mayors mentioned the so-called ‘ECAD’ intermunicipal system, which manages and organises the provision of social assistance for the elderly, minors, disabled, people with psycho-physical handicaps, and families with social distress. Services include, among others, home and residential care services, transport to healthcare providers, schools and other social centres, and financial support. The governance of this intermunicipal organisation rests with the *Unione di Comuni* (Combined Authority), which is expected to restructure additional services at the intermunicipal level beyond social assistance and healthcare.

Education shows the second-largest priority-capacity gap: only one mayor reported a negative priority, as they were satisfied with the current system relying on school bus transport, bringing students to the next municipality in a 15-min trip. As for capacity, an obvious depopulation issue takes the lead, as “beyond everything we can intervene on, such as maintenance [of school buildings], what can we do against regulations on the number of students or teachers assigned?” (M1, 30/03/26). In other words, the main issue is the lack of children, and a national legislation that sets a minimum viable number of children below which the school should be closed down. Beyond the medium-long-term re-inhabiting scenario, the main challenge for municipal institutions is therefore safeguarding the school bus system, which the municipal

administration funds with its own resources to offer the service free of charge to its residents. School transport is currently organised and managed at the intermunicipal level, but with a certain degree of informality, as mayors interact directly with each other outside of formal institutional structures, as only some of the municipalities along the route to the school engage in organising the school transport service. Additionally, school transport also represents a form of remunicipalisation, being at the interface between education and public transport: the regional public transport company 'TUA' (Trasporto Unico Abruzzese) organised its bus service around students timetables, meaning that any other everyday social practice relies on private car transport ("You can take the bus to go to the hospital, but you need to leave around 6:00-7:00 am", M2, 10/04/26). The result is that residents' preferences have been shaped by and constructed upon this lack. Public transport ranks as the seventh-largest priority-capacity gap, with a median capacity of 0.00. This issue is critical for the future of public transport in the Inner Area and represents a chicken-and-egg problem: there are no buses, so residents are used to travelling by private car; and since everyone uses their own car, there are no rides other than those for students. A clear example of subtractive recalibration emerges here: the Regional public transport company TUA has started privatising some rides, through subcontracting to other private transport companies, and some municipalities have already seen the impact of this restructuring:

It is quite absurd because public transport is a public service, you should not be allowed to privatise it. It cannot be. I saw an article the other day in a local newspaper saying that in [another municipality] already served by this private company, one day the driver was sick and so the bus ride did not take place. You are free to do as you please. Or, if nobody gets on the bus, the driver could decide not to leave. This is the problem: the service is not guaranteed. (M5, 15/04/26)

As for shops, the third category with the largest priority-capacity gap, we notice how its median drops to -0.5, and no mayor assigned a value higher than 0.5. Only one mayor assigned a low priority (-0.75) to shops, based on their perception of the everyday needs of residents and on which type of services are deemed as 'essential' to stay:

The priority of shops is relative, same with banks and post offices: fine if they are here but we are used to e-commerce... Or you get more groceries at discounts, as it is cheaper. You don't go to the greengrocer, the butcher, the fishmonger, the bakery anymore — only a few families continue like this. We go to supermarkets and get anything we need, same with clothing. [...] Clearly, it would be great to have all this, but if I must assign priorities, I do not think about shops; I am more concerned with the bar, for example. (M6, interview transcript 15/04/26)

Table 3.2: Priority and Capacity scores for categories (median across municipalities), their gap, range, and standard deviation, sorted by gap dimension. Below, the same scores for respondent municipalities (median across categories), with demographic data on residents (2025) and demographic change (natural and migratory balance as %, 2015-2025) retrieved from ISTAT.

Category	Priority-Capacity gap	Priority scores	Priority range (and SD)	Capacity scores	Capacity range (and SD)
Healthcare services	1.25	1	0.5, 1 (0.21)	-0.25	-1, 1 (0.71)
Education services	1.13	0.75	-0.75, 1 (0.57)	-0.38	-1, 1 (0.80)
Shops	1.13	0.63	-0.75, 1 (0.53)	-0.50	-1, 0.5 (0.54)
Tourism	0.88	0.63	-0.5, 1 (0.45)	-0.25	-1, 0.5 (0.53)
Fuel stations	0.88	0.13	-1, 1 (0.71)	-0.75	-1, 0.75 (0.57)
Bars and restaurants	0.75	0.50	-0.5, 1 (0.50)	-0.25	-1, 0.75 (0.59)
Public transport	0.63	0.63	0, 1 (0.36)	0	-0.75, 1 (0.73)
Banks and post offices	0.63	0.25	-0.75, 1 (0.76)	-0.38	-1, 1 (0.70)
Social functions	0.38	0.88	-0.75, 1 (0.54)	0.50	-0.75, 1 (0.63)
Culture and heritage	0.25	0.50	0.25, 1 (0.24)	0.25	-1, 1 (0.63)

Respondent	Priority-Capacity gap	Priority scores	Capacity scores	Residents	Demographic change (%)
M (mayor) 7	-0.25	0.50	0.75	567	-2.4
M3	0.13	0.25	0.13	105	-9.5
M9	0.25	1	0.75	336	-20
M1	0.38	0.38	0	280	-25.5
M6	0.88	0.50	-0.38	253	-21.2
M4	1.13	0.13	-1	70	-17.6
M8	1.13	1	-0.13	299	-18.3
M2	1.25	0.75	-0.50	122	-3.2
M5	1.25	0.75	-0.50	100	-12.3
M10	1.38	1	-0.38	284	-6.6

Table 3.3: Priority scores for obstacles (with range and standard deviation), and obstacles added by respondents with assigned priority (multiple numbers correspond to different respondents).

Obstacles	Priority	Range	SD
Lack of essential services	0.69	0, 1	0.41
Distance from service-provision centres	0.29	0, 0.88	0.39
Distance from larger cities	0.21	0, 0.88	0.36
Lack of proximity services	0.19	0, 1	0.39
Opening hours	0.00	0, 0.63	0.20
Quality of existing services	0.00	0, 0.50	0.18

Extra-list obstacles (and assigned priority), sorted by cumulative priority and frequency

Economic sustainability of existing services (1; 0.9; 0.8)	Recalibration of public transport on long-range (1)
Smaller service-provision areas and proximity access (0.9; 0.5)	Management and maintenance of existing and new services (0.9)
Needs of residents and individuals (1; 0.1)	Mobility within and across municipalities (0.8)
Uncertain regularity of access to services (1)	Management of cultural and sport facilities (0.6)
Lack of innovation in how services are provided (1)	Management at municipal level (0.6)

Another important aspect that mayors described is that, with respect to the presence and diversity of shops, they take a more passive role. They feel capable of facilitating the presence of buildings and other spaces that can host new entrepreneurs (“I am looking for resources to create a smart store, a sort of 24/7 vending machine with no employees, selling local products and some first necessity goods”, M9, 20/04/26). However, municipal institutions struggle to ‘motivate’ or attract new entrepreneurs to open proximity stores or renew existing ones — and also face a lack of entrepreneurial culture (cf. Fulgenzi, 2026).

On the opposite end, the mapping exercise reveals Culture and Social functions as the least misaligned in terms of priority and capacity, and the only two categories with a positive, non-zero median Capacity score. As for culture, only two mayors reported negative capacity scores (-1 and -0.75), stemming from the difficulty of co-creating cultural activities with other municipal actors, particularly CSOs. Despite the relatively high density of local associations for socio-cultural events (e.g., ‘Pro Loco’ associations carrying out promotional activities for residents and tourists), the presence of ‘small-village social dynamics’ among residents, between them and the municipal administration, or between CSOs in another nearby village, sometimes create tensions that degrade interpersonal relations, social cohesion, mutuality, and a sense of shared belonging and identity (“that sense of community, harmony, within a village”, M8, 17/04/26).

Mayors provided a clear example of how subtractive recalibration leads to progressive peripheralization. They depicted a complex interrelation of obstacles and challenges related to institutional capacity, politics, and multilevel governance and decision-making. The general feeling is a kind of ‘haemorrhagic narrative’ (cf. Fulgenzi, 2026) related to capacity and power:

There’s nothing we can influence. Besides shouting and crying out in person... nothing determinant. For example, Poste Italiane finally placed an ATM in our square, after 3-4 years of me breaking my back to have one installed. And now they cannot activate it because of a technical issue with the alarm system. They told me: «Sorry, but we bit off more than we could chew». That’s the real politics. What are we even talking about? (M10, interview transcript 24/04/26)

This narrative is explicitly based on the misalignment between the needs and the aspirations of local communities (and municipal actors, including institutions). In the dominant econometric and market-based rationale driving the restructuring of service provision, one-third of the mayors cited the economic sustainability of existing services as the most critical obstacle. The dominant rationale leads to the foregrounding of cost-revenue considerations at the expense of safeguarding the public function behind service provision:

The Municipality cannot influence a whole lot of issues. Take social services: we wanted a sub-regional subdivision, because there are 10 different worlds from one side to the other of the Inner Area. But then, economically speaking, this would only delay the moment the service will be marketized. The more you divide it, the more it costs, so you must understand that these

economic rules conflict with the political strategy. Demand and offer will never coincide; their curves will always run parallel to each other. (M10, interview transcript 24/04/26)

The second-most frequent and important obstacle is the unsuitability of current service catchment areas. Once again, as mentioned in the previous quote, the issue of economic sustainability re-emerges. While reducing the service catchment area facilitates its organisation and provision, especially through formal and informal inter-municipalisation, the number of residents/users further decreases. In turn, the difficulty of implementing an adaptive rescaling of welfare and services arises from the lack of financial resources in the municipal institution, as well as from the lack of power in the decision-making process:

TUA had already decided on the privatisations. I met the president of TUA by chance before a meeting, and a bus driver was tagging along. This driver has three children and lives here, he invested resources in buying a house, got a mortgage, made some sacrifices... [...] And the president said: «Do not worry, we will send you close by, but the decision is taken. We are privatising some routes. (M5, 15/04/26)

The 'passivity' of this role is also evident in more innovative and/or experimental forms of welfare and service provision, as in the case of a Regional initiative (together with the local ASL) that established a mobile healthcare office through a re-purposed camper car, which made some health screening services available for free to residents in several municipalities throughout the Region. The initiative is perceived as a potential solution to the difficulty of establishing a single, fixed service-provision centre, especially given the vastness and low population density of the Inner Area. While the project started in 2024 and tens of thousands of residents accessed the service, it is portrayed as a temporary and one-off solution that does not replace the need for healthcare services and assistance (doctors, hospitals, localised centres, home care, pharmacies) — as the mobile healthcare service only stopped 1-2 days in each municipality, and only offered screenings.

5. Discussion

A central question remains regarding collective agency for developing new paths in peripheral areas: namely, how structural constraints and governance obstacles influence municipal institutional capacity to reinstate welfare provision and service accessibility. Important implications for regional development policy emerge, related to how to support the empowerment and capacity-building of municipal institutions. Three main takeaway messages can be derived from our analysis, each with relevant policy implications.

First, the type of withered agency of municipal institutions, as described by mayors' perspectives and experiences, does not stem from a lack of political will at the local level. It is rather an asymmetry in power relations (Nilsen et al., 2022), or a governance mismatch, in which responsibilities attributed to municipal institutions are

not matched by adequate capacity to fulfil administrative functions. The result of withered agency is the impossibility of institutionalising new path developments and path-breaking processes, of upscaling them at higher spatial scales (e.g., at the intermunicipal and regional levels), and of ensuring their long-term sustainability. Withered agency is hence internalised (Calignano, 2026) among municipal institutions, expressed in the frustrating ‘paradox of the local’: the institution closest to communities (to their needs, aspirations, specificities, and historical context) is also the least capable actor to safeguard their wellbeing. To address this paradox, the national government should design governance arrangements that more closely align decision-making responsibilities with municipal administrative and financial capacities, providing municipalities with greater financial resources and discretionary powers to address local needs.

Second, expanding the notion of municipal welfare to a wider range of ‘second welfare’ leads to an important argument about the variety of institutional agency and its heterogeneity across different types of SGIs. Each of these has a varying degree of existential value and urgency, and require different interventions to restore accessibility. From the perspective of institutional agency, this entails that capacity-building policy intervention should first target the services with the largest priority-capacity gap, possibly starting from those with the highest priority, hence urgency. With respect to the differentiation of services, those serving local communities should be made more accessible with respect to presence, such as bars and cafes, post offices (e.g., Cieślak, 2025) and shops providing first necessity goods. Other services relying on larger, intermunicipal catchment areas, such as hospitals and schools, could benefit from renewed proximity (i.e., easier and faster to reach them through mobility, public transport, or mobile provision units). If local and regional development policy could strengthen the autonomy of municipal institutions, and, in turn, their capacity to intervene in municipal welfare, we could assume that each place and community could determine which type of service constitutes a precondition for habitability in its specific territorial context. From a central government perspective, having a knowledge base on both the geography of withered agencies and the competencies where the priority-capacity gap is larger may help policymakers identify where (i.e. which geographical and policy areas) a municipal agency is most severely withered. Such evidence can inform targeted interventions aimed at strengthening local institutional capacity, which need to be calibrated to the intensity and nature of institutional capacity gaps, recognising that their extent varies both geographically and across policy sectors.

Third, intermunicipalisation emerges as a sort of compensation mechanism for withered agency. While not solving all structural constrictions, such as public investments and funding opportunities tailored to specific intervention strategies, it can help bridge the priority-capacity gap. Specifically, intermunicipal arrangements offer a wider range of benefits than simply facilitating the adaptive rescaling of welfare: they can promote co-operation among municipal institutions, the sharing of resources, the centralisation of administrative functions (including their delegated technical offices)

among participating institutions, and the engagement with commoning processes (Papa et al., 2025), engaging a wider range of social infrastructure within and beyond administrative borders.

Conclusions

In this article, we analysed the configuration of actor composition and the services of general interest they represent in the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area in the Abruzzo Region, Italy. We then assess the agency of municipal public administrations using a questionnaire, integrated with interview data, to measure their perceived priority-capacity gap across 10 service categories. The aim was to examine how structural constraints and governance arrangements shape the capacity of municipal institutions to ensure welfare provision and service accessibility in peripheral areas. The backdrop is one where processes of subtractive rescaling, state withdrawal, and privatisation of welfare and services result from geographically uneven development, which continues to operate on market-based, econometric, and efficiency principles at the expense of residents' right to stay or, more generally, basic citizenship rights. The collected perceptions, experiences, knowledge, and perspectives of mayors provide evidence that the progressive subtractive rescaling of welfare and services put a strain on residents' everyday social practices, needs, and aspirations. Our findings have shown that municipal governments often face a condition of what we call withered agency, whereby they retain formal responsibilities for responding to community needs but lack the administrative, financial, and organisational capacities required to do so effectively. We argue that this does not reflect a lack of political will at the local level, but rather a condition that emerges from a broader governance mismatch between responsibilities and capabilities. By introducing the concept of the priority-capacity gap, through which we empirically assessed the extent of the withering of agency, the paper provides a framework for understanding how institutional capacities vary across territories and service domains. These reflections contribute to academic debates on (transformative) agency and governance for welfare in left-behind places, while offering salient policy guidance within the current EU policy discourse around the 'right to stay'. Understanding the uneven geography of municipal agency and its determinants has, in fact, become increasingly important in a context where concerns about spatial justice are placing renewed attention on the role of local institutions in ensuring well-being in peripheral areas.

The first contribution enriches the debate on agency in peripheral areas by showing that the ability of local actors to shape development trajectories cannot be understood independently from the institutional and governance conditions within which they operate. While research on peripheral regions has often highlighted their exclusion from wider power and decision-making networks or their lack of voice in the agenda-setting of national priorities, our findings demonstrate that municipal institutions may

experience a specific form of constrained agency, which we conceptualise as withered agency and which, beyond the well-known local actors' powerlessness within supralocal government scales, emphasises their narrow room for action in fulfilling their welfare and development functions at the very scale at which they are called to operate. This condition arises primarily because local governments retain formal responsibilities for welfare provision and territorial development but lack the resources, competences, and administrative capacity to fulfil them.

Second, the paper contributes to the literature on transformative agency. Existing accounts often conceptualise agency as a relatively uniform attribute of actors, varying mainly according to motivations, intentionality or strategic capabilities. Our findings suggest that agency is also unevenly distributed and differentiated across places and policy domains, and moreover that it depends on what local policy-makers deem a priority for their territory (in terms of welfare and well-being in our specific case). Through the operative notion of the priority-capacity gap, we show how institutional actors may possess different capacities to intervene based on the specific welfare functions and governance challenges they face. This highlights the need for more nuanced conceptualisations of transformative agency that account for territorial and sectoral variations in institutional capacity.

Third, the study contributes to research on intermunicipal cooperation and governance, emphasising how horizontal or vertical relationships across governance tiers affect municipal agency of remote places differently. From our perspective, withered agency is not only an inherently local or localised condition but also the manifestation of (vertical) scalar tensions across governance levels and domains of competencies. We also saw how intermunicipal (horizontal) cooperation may partially mitigate these frictions and compensate for structural constraints proper to a condition of peripherality.

Municipal institutions find themselves in a difficult position, between attempts to engage with several types of actors at multiple governance levels. This brings us to outline the main policy implications that can be drawn from our findings. They suggest that one of the central challenges in managing local welfare for remote habitability (Grazioli & Urso, 2026) is that, while central institutions operating at higher geographical scales often struggle to understand, anticipate, and address the specific needs of peripheral communities, municipal institutions closest to those communities frequently lack the capacity to act effectively. In this context, the knowledge generated by this study, and most especially its scalability and replicability, provides a valuable place-sensitive tool for identifying where institutional capacity gaps are most severe and where municipal agency is most withered.

Furthermore, on the one hand, the presence of few (if any) firms, cooperatives, and/or CSOs in their municipality opens opportunities for community-based and remunicipalised forms of welfare and service provision. This is the case of community cooperatives, which also provide employment opportunities to member residents. Mapping the uneven distribution of municipal actors reveals the sharp difference

between the Regional capital of L'Aquila and the municipalities in the Inner Area. Organisational thinness and the low differentiation of actors (Tödtling & Trippel, 2005; Nilsen et al., 2022) seem to provide a dichotomous perspective where a municipality (with its different types of actors) is either central or not. Similarly, the SNAI policy attempted to offer a more nuanced definition of peripherality — based on travel-time distance from urban/metropolitan centres. In fact, a similar rationale can be found in the SNAI, where the peripherality of places is defined only as a function of the centralities (i.e., every non-central place is a periphery).

On the other hand, this 'proactive' form of institutional entrepreneurship clashes with supralocal actors whose decisions are either subtractive or reproduce a bearish dependency culture, in which mayors "are still grateful" (M6, 15/04/26) for having a general practitioner come once a month to their municipal doctor's office. This policy narrative inherently reproduces stigma and a crisis-centred framing of development paths (Calignano, 2026), and it reinforces the need for continuous policy intervention, raising important political economy questions on how the right policy mix of place-based and people-based approaches can be integrated into place-sensitive (Iammarino et al., 2019) instruments. Access to welfare and services is often regarded as a people-based approach, aiming at equalisation of welfare and service provision, although Inner Areas (and in general, places affected by slow-burn processes of uneven development) can benefit from a temporally concentrated funding, aiming at restoring equal access in the mid-term (Dijkstra, 2024). Finally, our results call for policy interventions to move beyond generic support for peripheral areas and adopt a more differentiated approach to institutional strengthening. Improving welfare provision and service accessibility means, in the end, enhancing the liveability, long-term sustainability, and viability of peripheral places.

Endnotes

[1] In 2021, the Italian cohesion policy agency established the Dottorato Comunale (Municipal PhD) programmes: three cohorts of PhD candidates with a research project co-designed between (at least four) municipalities in one of the 72 pilot Inner Areas and local universities. The objective of Municipal PhD is to support "the definition, implementation, study, and monitoring of local sustainable development strategies" (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2021).

[2] The SNAI policy identified city-hubs ('centralities') as places endowed with three types of essential services: for healthcare, the presence of an emergency-treatment unit and admission facility; for education, the presence of at least one high school and one vocational or technical institute; and for public transport, the presence of a train station with medium capacity serving long-distance travelling). After identifying the centres (poli), progressive peripherality levels have been defined based on travel time (by private car) to reach city-hubs (DPS, 2021; Rossitti et al., 2021)

[3] The threshold was chosen based on existing studies on everyday mobility patterns of individuals, which identify 30 minutes as the maximum travel time that accounts for circadian

rhythms and affects location preferences on housing, employment, and access to welfare and services (Compagnucci & Morettini, 2020)

[4] In the Italian legislative context, the classification of “social cooperatives” is based on their primary activity. Social subcategory “Type A” denotes individual support and care services; while “Type B” cooperatives facilitate the integration of disadvantaged persons into the job market. The social category consists in a three-letter code based on national and regional registers.

[5] The artificial intelligence (LLM) software Thaura (thaura.ai/home) was employed to help the identification of actor type based on the CSO’s name. The authors provided the software a list of CSOs names and their existing categorisation by the authors, and it was asked to show how uncategorised actors could be classified, and whether further classifications would be added. Authors then manually validated suggested classification, sometimes merging, moving, or renaming categories considering the newly created ones.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Contributions

Andrea Fulgenzi: conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, software, supervision, visualisation, writing.

Giulia Urso: conceptualisation, methodology, supervision, writing.

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Annex 1: Data cleaning and actor-selection details

The following annex details the methodological procedures of accessing, integrating, manipulating, and cleaning secondary data on the presence of municipal actors (firms, cooperatives, and civil-society organisations) in the case study municipalities.

We deductively created a selection of NACE activity codes (Table A3.1) that can represent essential and proximity services for residents in Inner-Area municipalities. We hence selected 4,935 firms, located both within the Inner Area perimeter and its 30'-driving isochrone. To this list, we added 70 cooperatives classified as "Type A" (individual support and care services) in the same spatial extent. To process the remaining 784 actors without NACE activity code, including 497 civil society organisations (CSOs), we performed a text-based categorisation based on official-statistics description of products and services offered by each actor (although only applicable to 219 entities), as well as the actor's registered name.

Table A3.1: List of NACE rev2 activity codes used for selecting firms and cooperatives.

NACE class	Activity description
4620	Wholesale of agricultural raw materials and live animals
4630	Wholesale of food, beverages and tobacco
4640	Wholesale of household goods
4650	Wholesale of information and communication equipment
4660	Wholesale of other machinery, equipment and supplies
4700	Retail trade, except of motor vehicles and motorcycles
5500	Accommodation
5610	Restaurants and mobile food service activities
7500	Veterinary activities
8500	Education
8600	Human health activities
8700	Residential care activities
8800	Social work activities without accommodation
9000	Creative, arts and entertainment activities
9100	Libraries, archives, museums and other cultural activities
9300	Sports activities and amusement and recreation activities
9600	Other personal service activities

Table A3.2: Keywords and NACE (Rev2) codes used to filter out actors based on their registered name or activity.

Keywords	
Tattoo, entertainment ("animazione"), events, grooming, dog, pet, investigation, security, truck conveyor, moving, consulting, blood banks, organ donation, "under liquidation", English schools	
NACE code	Description
6311	Data processing, hosting and related activities
8121	General cleaning of buildings
8553	Driving school activities
9601	Washing and (dry-)cleaning of textile and fur products
9603	Funeral and related activities

Table A3.3: Description of NACE groups and classes and their categorisation among SGI categories and subcategories

Group	Group description	Category	Subcategory	Classes included
46.2	Wholesale of agricultural raw materials and live animals	Shops	Agriculture and livestock	46.21 - 46.24
46.3	Wholesale of food, beverages and tobacco	Shops	Wholesale F&B	46.30 - 46.34, 46.36 - 46.39
46.3	Wholesale of food, beverages and tobacco	Shops	Wholesale other	46.35
46.4	Wholesale of household goods	Shops	Household and houseware	46.40 - 46.41, 46.43 - 46.44, 46.47 - 46.49
46.4	Wholesale of household goods	Shops	Wholesale clothes	46.42
46.4	Wholesale of household goods	Shops	Wholesale pharmaceutical and personal care	46.45 - 46.46
46.5	Wholesale of information and communication equipment	Shops	Wholesale electronics	46.51 - 46.52
46.6	Wholesale of other machinery, equipment and supplies	Shops	Wholesale machinery and equipment	46.60 - 46.63, 46.65 - 46.66, 46.69
47	Retail trade, except of motor vehicles and motorcycles	Shops	Food and groceries	47
47	Retail trade, except of motor vehicles and motorcycles	Shops	Other retail	47
47.1	Retail sale in non-specialised stores	Shops	Food and groceries	47.11
47.1	Retail sale in non-specialised stores	Shops	Other retail	47.10, 47.19
47.2	Retail sale of food, beverages and tobacco in specialised stores	Shops	Food and groceries	47.20 - 47.26, 47.29
47.3	Retail sale of automotive fuel in specialised stores	Fuelstations		47.3
47.4	Retail sale of information and communication equipment in specialised stores	Shops	Electronics	47.41 - 47.42
47.5	Retail sale of other household equipment in specialised stores	Shops	Electronics	47.54
47.5	Retail sale of other household equipment in specialised stores	Shops	Household and houseware	47.50 - 47.53, 47.59
47.6	Retail sale of cultural and recreation goods in specialised stores	Shops	Books, music, newspapers, stationery	47.61 - 47.63
47.6	Retail sale of cultural and recreation goods in specialised stores	Shops	Clothes	47.64
47.6	Retail sale of cultural and recreation goods in specialised stores	Shops	Other retail	47.65

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47.7	Retail sale of other goods in specialised stores	Shops	Agriculture and livestock	47.76
47.7	Retail sale of other goods in specialised stores	Shops	Clothes	47.71 - 47.72
47.7	Retail sale of other goods in specialised stores	Shops	Other retail	47.70, 47.77 - 47.79
47.7	Retail sale of other goods in specialised stores	Shops	Personal care	47.73 - 47.75
47.8	Retail sale via stalls and markets	Shops	Stalls and Markets	47.80 - 47.82, 47.89
47.9	Retail trade not in stores, stalls or markets	Shops	Online and other	47.91, 47.99
47.9	Retail trade not in stores, stalls or markets	Shops	Stalls and Markets	47.9
55	Accommodation	Hotels	Hotels and accommodations	55
55.1	Hotels and similar accommodation	Hotels	Hotels and accommodations	55.1
55.2	Holiday and other short-stay accommodation	Hotels	B&B and short stay	55.2
55.3	Camping grounds, recreational vehicle parks and trailer parks	Hotels	Camping	55.3
55.9	Other accommodation	Hotels	Other	55.9
56.1	Restaurants and mobile food service activities	F&B	Restaurants and Pubs	56.1
75	Veterinary activities	Healthcare	Veterinary	75
85.1	Pre-primary education	Education	Pre-primary	85.1
85.3	Secondary education	Education	Secondary	85.31
85.3	Secondary education	Education	Technical and vocational	85.32
85.4	Higher education	Education	Tertiary	85.42
85.5	Other education	Education	Other Education	85.50 - 85.52, 85.59
85.6	Educational support activities	Education	Other Education	85.6
86	Human health activities	Healthcare	Other	86
86.1	Hospital activities	Healthcare	Hospitals	86.1
86.2	Medical and dental practice activities	Healthcare	Doctors	86.21 - 86.23

The 'withered' agency of municipal institutions

86.9	Other human health activities	Healthcare	Other	86.9
87	Residential care activities	Healthcare	Residential Care	87
87.1	Residential nursing care activities	Healthcare	Residential Care	87.1
87.2	Residential care activities for mental retardation, mental health and substance abuse	Healthcare	Residential Care	87.2
87.3	Residential care activities for the elderly and disabled	Healthcare	Residential Care	87.3
87.9	Other residential care activities	Healthcare	Residential Care	87.9
88	Social work activities without accommodation	Social	Non-residential care	88
88.1	Social work activities without accommodation for the elderly and disabled	Social	Non-residential care	88.1
88.9	Other social work activities without accommodation	Social	Child day-care	88.91
88.9	Other social work activities without accommodation	Social	Non-residential care	88.99
90	Creative, arts and entertainment activities	Culture	Creative & Performing Arts	90.00 - 90.03
91	Libraries, archives, museums and other cultural activities	Culture	Libraries, Archives & Museums	91.00 - 91.01, 91.03 - 91.04
93.1	Sports activities	Social	Sports	93.10 - 93.13, 93.19
93.2	Amusement and recreation activities	Social	Amusement and recreation	93.21, 93.29
96	Other personal service activities	Healthcare	Physical well-being activities	96.04
96	Other personal service activities	Shops	Personal care	96.02, 96.04, 96.09
Keywords	Theater, music, dance, choir, choral, polyphonic	Culture	Creative & Performing Arts	na
Keywords	Pro loco	Culture	Pro Loco	na
Keywords	Red cross, green cross, white cross, public assistance	Healthcare	Emergency	na
Keywords	Environment, nature	Social	Environment	na
Keywords	Civil protection	Social	Protezione civile	na
Keywords	Family counseling, family	Social	Socio-psychological care	na

Keywords	Caritas, solidarity	Social	Solidarity care	na
Keywords	Sports	Social	Sports	na

Table A3.4: Total number of actors by type, before and after the data-cleaning procedure and the selection by NACE activity code and cooperative type.

Data-manipulation step	Actor type			Total	
	Cooperatives	CSOs	Firms		
Imported from official registries		1,544	3,345	143,975	148,864
Selected within 30' distance		207	594	18,201	19,002
Dropped by keywords		16	29	1,132	1,177
Dropped by liquidation		1	0	76	75
Selected by NACE and category		24	544	4,676	5,244

Annex 2: Semi-structured interview protocol

The following annex describes how we accessed primary data. It specifically details the contents of the semi-structured interview, including its protocol, and the two questions (prioritisation and mapping) that were presented during the interview through the support of an online questionnaire.

After receiving explicit written consent to participate to the research, to be recorded, and having provided the participant with information on the research context, and how data will be accessed and processed, each mayor was asked to comment on the cartographic and infographic visualisation on the presence, diversity, and distance of SGIs, both for their municipality and for the Inner Area as a whole. Then, they were presented the list of 10 municipalities with the highest relative number of firms, co-operatives, and CSOs, and they provided comments on the presence and role of municipal actors. The first structured question was formulated as: «Which are the current obstacles to services accessibility?».

The second structured question, related to the prioritisation of obstacles, was formulated as: «Which obstacles to accessibility have more importance and/or priority?». A list of randomly-sorted obstacles was presented, and the participant was asked to rearrange the list items using the digital support that the researcher provided.

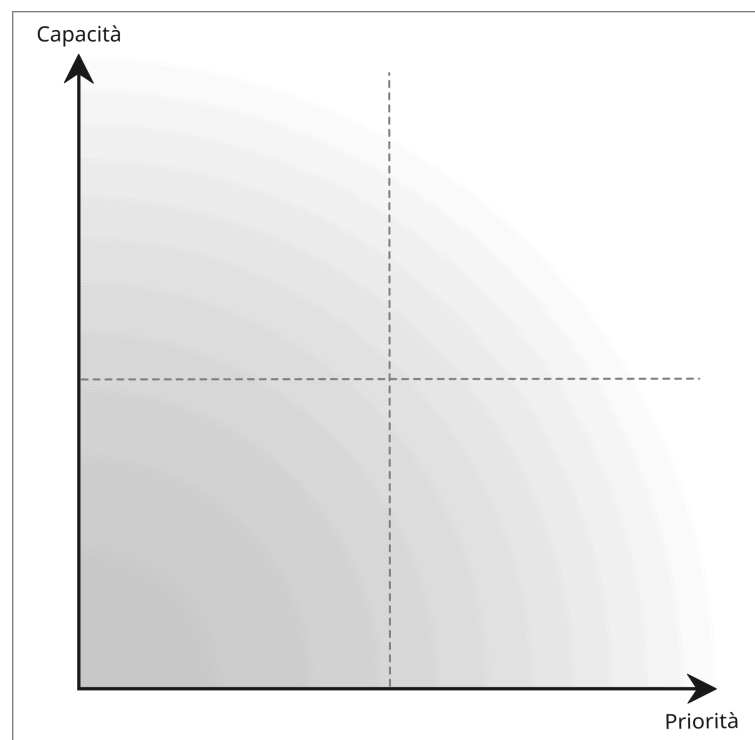


Figure A3.1: Copy of the priority-capacity graph presented to interview participants, in the supporting questionnaire.

The third question consisted in the mapping exercise of service categories along the two axes of priority and capacity (represented in Figure A3.1). The question was formulated as: «Which services are more or less fundamental for the development of this area? To what extent is the Municipal Public Administration “able” to influence their accessibility?». The graph included 10 text boxes to be rearranged during the mapping exercise corresponding to the 10 SGI categories: banks and post offices, social facilities, culture, fuel stations, bars and restaurants, shops, tourism accommodations, healthcare, education, and public transport. The participant was reminded of the possibility of modifying and/or adding to these categories.

CONCLUSIONS

Learning among municipalities, transforming regional development policy

SNAI is (was?) also built as a machine for learning, through a daily relationship between the central group and the local level, and in both directions — an essential part of the ‘new method’ of public action. [...] But then this process was not given the necessary weight, and the intervention became bogged down with the dismantling of the central technical office. (Barca, 2022)

Hope is what reinforces the true meaning behind the commitment of mayors from 3,500 mountain municipalities. That is, working together, create territorial projects, measure the impacts and opportunities of invested euros and implemented actions, to counter abandonment, depopulation, fragility. (UNCCEM, 2025)

The present PhD research investigated the outcomes of geographically uneven development for the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area, especially with respect to the impacts on institutional transformative agency and service accessibility. The conceptual framework integrates the Economic Geography (EG) literature on regional development in peripheral, ‘left-behind’, and uneven development contexts with evolutionary and institutional approaches, as well as with regional innovation studies literature on transformative resilience and change agency. The type of local and regional development pathway that is called for is labelled ‘transformative’ due to its potential for a “transformative shift in policy model and resource commitment” (Martin et al., 2021, p. 109): a radical and systemic change that affects regional development structures while promoting new governance arrangements and reflexive attitudes towards norms, cultures, values, motivations and rationales of regional development actors. In Inner Areas, the concept of habitability carries a similar potential: deciding to relocate in these small municipalities is evidently based on existentialist values, including the desire for amenities and nature; but it cannot overlook the opportunity to experiment with pluriactivity, mobility, mutual help, and innovative approaches to the management and care of resources (Mariani, 2024).

The need to reframe local and regional development policy around a historical and political perspective on peripherality also emerges from the inadequacy and outdatedness (Fiorentino et al., 2024) of previous economic models, which failed to reduce socio-economic inequalities among the communities, institutions, and economic systems of peripheral areas. While the concept of ‘left-behind places’ has only recently gained academic and policy relevance, the need for more sustainable and spatially-just development paths has been evident in Inner Areas since the second half of the XXth century. Inner Areas represent the spatially remote and small municipalities that had already experienced depopulation, lack of economic opportunities, and the withdrawal of the welfare state, therefore earlier than the post-industrial and/or large cities that are now being considered ‘left-behind’. I therefore align with calls of discard as much as possible the use of the term ‘left-behind’, both due the judgemental and stigmatising meaning behind it, and due to the availability of other terms that allow for situating peripherality and marginalisation as an active process reproduced by uneven development and its capitalist and neoliberal economic system.

Unfortunately, I fear that uneven development has almost been normalised throughout the years, as it is becoming rooted in local and regional economic systems and institutions, and in the minds and narratives of residents alike. Demographic trends (depopulation, high structural dependency rates) inevitably contributed to the construction and reproduction of the ‘haemorrhagic narrative’ that questions the possibility of facilitating transformative resilience. As mentioned by a mayor interviewed for the third chapter of this thesis, depopulation is the main and most urgent obstacles to habitability: “We were proactive 40 years ago, because we had 300 more residents [...]. Accessibility [to services] is inexistent, because there are no residents; or better, there are no resident that can influence it” (M10, 24/04/26). Therefore, facilitating multiple forms of permanent and temporary neo-inhabiting (Spadano, 2024) seems to represent the first contextual condition for the emergence and establishment of new local and regional development paths. It is important to acknowledge that contemporary Italian academics, practitioners, and policy- and decision-makers seem particularly aligned with this political and existentialist perspective on spatial inequalities. The establishment of SNAI provided the opportunity to reframe the policy debate on territorial cohesion, while it facilitated the entrance of new lexicons and perspective on peripherality into the policy arena. As the first quote at the beginning of this chapter depicts, however, one of the critical shortcomings of SNAI was overlooking the structural condition of institutional capacity, in terms of human resources, know-how, expenditure capacity, and administrative support, which continue to be the most referred-to problems reported by mayors and technical officers.

On the other hand, the second quote attempts reinforcing the narrative of inter-municipal cooperation, especially by building upon shared value-frames, needs, objectives and aspirations. The contemporary political scenario in Italy, however, does not offer promising futures for local and regional development policy. Or at least, the

sense of responsibility shared by mayors and institutional representatives, their coalitions, and negotiation attempts in the national policy arena, may not be enough to sustain and improve incumbent place-based development policy. First, the Strategic National Plan of Inner Areas (Piano Strategico Nazionale delle Aree Interne, PSNAI), drafted in 2025 for the programming period 2021-2027, portrayed a fatalistic, stigmatising, and gendered picture of Inner Areas, which can either go through an “increase in the average number of children per woman” or an “accompaniment through an irreversible depopulation process” (Dipartimento per le politiche di coesione e per il sud, 2025, p. 45, own translation). Even the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan failed to appreciate the specificities of each territorial dimension, missed the establishment of actual co-creation processes, and overlooked the weakness of local governments’ administrative capacity to implement interventions (Carrosio et al., 2022). In the meantime, a wide range of individuals, local institutions, organisations, and informal groups continue engaging in (action-)research and experiments for habitability, often co-creating these with local communities and actors. These actors form networks and coalitions with significantly strong social ties, and some even formulated a political reaction to the PSNAI policy (cf. C’è Margine, 2025). It remains to be seen whether their institutionalisation could increase their critical mass against political elites and higher-level decisionmakers, or if these initiatives will constitute an alternative policy arena to the government Strategy.

As abovementioned, transformative agency is the central topic of my PhD research around which primary data have been collected. However, I acknowledge the research could have benefited from including other types of actors embedding change agency. This choice was not intended to dismiss innovative entrepreneurship and place-based leadership. Rather, it arose from multiple considerations. First, as discussed in the first chapter, the role of non-firm actors and micro-level accounts of agency have been overlooked by the literature, as well as the potential of different types of innovation beyond highly specialised technologies, or the need to integrate needs-based principles for community wellbeing and social infrastructures (Alkemade et al., 2011; Weber & Rohrer, 2012; Truffer et al., 2015; Pezzi & Urso, 2016; Tödtling & Trippel, 2018; MacKinnon et al., 2022; Tomaney et al., 2024; Tomeo & Pazzagli, 2024). The literature has nonetheless explored other forms and outcomes of innovation processes in peripheral regions. Among these, social innovation seems relevant and promising as an example, although usually applied to the study of socio-technical systems (e.g., Suitner et al., 2023) than to habitability and the housing, employment, and services dimensions. More policy coordination across these dimensions is needed, as well as assessments and evaluation of past and ongoing strategies for facilitating organisational and policy learning processes.

Second, the overlap between the transformative agency component of place-based leadership and institutional entrepreneurship (cf. Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020) also emerged from the very first fieldwork activities (cf. Chapter 1, §1.1) and informal

interactions occurred with mayors throughout the research process. Mayors therefore perform a twofold role, acting as both institutional representatives (head of municipal governments), and as place-based political leaders that mobilise resources and competences for the wellbeing of their communities (cf. Calignano & Nilsen, 2024). In some cases, they even represent initiators of pathbreaking and path creation strategies. For example, the Gran Sasso – Valle Subequana Inner Area includes two well-known cases with the municipalities of Gagliano Aterno (with mayor Luca Santilli), which in 2025 won the New European Bauhaus prize ‘Boost for Small Municipalities’, and Fontecchio (with mayor Sabrina Ciancone), which is the first Italian municipality to adhere to the 2005 Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society. A myriad of similar examples, with national and international recognition, are available throughout Italy. Today, it is necessary to approach these collections of good practices with a renewed critical perspective, including their media representations, to prevent the reproduction paternalistic, apolitical, postcard-like, and conflict-free depictions of peripheral mountain municipalities.

Future research and policy should also integrate the services dimension of habitability with housing and employment opportunities, which currently laid outside the scope of the research. Focusing on employment is a complex issue, given the high structural dependency rate of the Inner Area municipalities and the thinness of the demographic segment mostly employed in traditional sectors. Several forms of entrepreneurial activities are present in the Inner Area, including community cooperatives, while mayors often reported how the lack of ‘entrepreneurial culture’ prevents the establishment and upscaling of more innovative practices. As for housing, the NEO project represents the only temporary housing experiment, which started in 2022 in Gagliano Aterno and, after 4 years, today includes 10 municipalities and is undergoing an institutionalisation project through the local Combined Authority, the Special Office for post-earthquake reconstruction (USRC), and two foundations supporting local and regional development strategies. A formal evaluation process of the social impact generated by the project has only recently started (in 2026), by an extra-regional social-impact organisation. Today, the only available assessment is anecdotal and with mixed results, as only a small number of project participants transformed their temporary residency in a permanent one. What is still missing on welfare and services accessibility is an intergenerational perspective, which could facilitate forms of “retroinnovation” (Tomeo & Pazzagli, 2024) that mobilise and recombine local material and immaterial resources and knowledge, even if related to agriculture and low-productivity sectors.

The second chapter also provided methodological contribution on mapping the uneven distribution of SGIs accessibility in peripheral areas. Accessing and analysing the Open Street Map database revealed an additional layer of peripherality evident

from data availability. Future research⁵ will investigate the potential overlap between peripheral mountain areas (and specifically Inner Areas) and the representativeness of available data, especially for amenities and buildings. Being the database based on community contributions, it became necessary to participate myself in the updating, deleting, and adding more than 350 points. Mapping and updating amenities and buildings in peripheral municipalities, which are constantly changing also due to ongoing post-earthquake reconstruction processes, emphasised the importance of ‘counting what counts’: to (re)assert the presence of a wide range of SGIs and cartographic elements, and experiment with the counter-map of a ‘hollow Italy’ (Tantillo, 2023) that still offers economic activities, social infrastructures, cultural material and immaterial heritage, public spaces, and proximity services in Inner Areas (e.g., Ferrante, 2023). The municipal (pre)conditions for ‘centrality’ emerge once again as “relativistic social construct” (Pezzi & Urso, 2016, p. 6), which depends on individual preferences and community social practices, on the presence and/or diversity of specific types of SGIs instead of others, and on polycentric/intermunicipal configurations of service accessibility. Therefore, including georeferenced, open-source, and community-based databases on SGIs (while ensuring and participating to their representativeness) can help accessing different types of territorial data at the lowest spatial resolution possible — up to the street level.

In addition to these limitations and future research opportunities, I acknowledge that the necessity of maintaining an Inner-Area perspective, without delving into one or more single municipalities (cf. Chapter 1, §1.1), prevented the establishment of a research co-creation process with participating mayors and municipalities. Engaging with research participants and/or local communities on a more regular and frequent basis, especially during the very first year of the PhD programme, could have surely allowed a more detailed interpretation of primary and secondary data, and supported their contextualisation around projects and normative-legal frameworks. Similarly, the participation of supralocal agencies (e.g., USRC, the Regional Park authority, the Local Action Group, non-governmental foundations) and regional institutions (e.g., Regional government and its offices) could have improved the political and policy implications against incumbent higher-level institutional actors. To reassert the *Dot-torato Comunale* aim and objectives behind the research, I believe a future dissemination and communication process will facilitate knowledge-sharing and organisational learning among municipal and Regional institutions, potentially thanks to

⁵ The topic will be further investigated in a future research by the author, which has been accepted for presentation in the Royal Geographical Society 2026 Annual Conference in London, session “Uneven Development: Decolonial, Feminist and Alternative Perspectives”. The contribution is titled “Counting what counts: unveiling social infrastructures, heritage, and local development opportunities through digital countermapping in peripheral places”, and it is co-authored with Micaela Mancini, fellow PhD candidate from GSSI.

translations, adaptations, and digital transpositions of cartographic and infographic outputs. Recalling the title of the research project, I believe future local and regional development policy should learn from and potentially institutionalise the experiences and practices distributed in Inner Areas, especially related to how municipal institutional agency represent a determinant and contextual (pre)condition for transformative resilience, through the restoring of habitability conditions and spatial justice.

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