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Questioning urbanisation models in the face of Covid-19. The crisis as a window of opportunity for inner areas / Cotella, Giancarlo; VITALE BROVARONE, Elisabetta. - In: TEMA. - ISSN 1970-9870. - ELETTRONICO. - Special Issue Covid-19 vs City-20:(2020), pp. 105-118. [10.6092/1970-9870/6913]

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2836708 since: 2020-06-19T15:52:01Z

Publisher:
Federico II University Press

Published
DOI:10.6092/1970-9870/6913

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12 October 2024

TeMA

Journal of Land Use, Mobility and Environment

This Special Issue of TeMA - Journal of Land Use, Mobility and Environment, collects twenty-seven contributes of international researchers and technicians in form of scenarios, insights, reasoning and research on the relations between the City and the impacts of Covid-19 pandemic, questioning about the development of a new vision and a general rethinking of the structure and urban organization.

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Special Issue

Covid -19 vs City -20

scenarios, insights, reasoning and research

ISSN 1970-9889
University of Naples Federico II

TeMA Journal of
Land Use, Mobility and Environment

Special Issue

COVID-19 vs CITY-20
SCENARIOS, INSIGHTS, REASONING AND RESEARCH

Published by
Laboratory of Land Use Mobility and Environment
DICEA - Department of Civil, Architectural and Environmental Engineering
University of Naples "Federico II"

TeMA is realized by CAB - Center for Libraries at “Federico II” University of Naples using Open Journal System

Editor-in-chief: Rocco Papa
print ISSN 1970-9889 | on line ISSN 1970-9870
Licence: Cancelleria del Tribunale di Napoli, n° 6 of 29/01/2008

Editorial correspondence
Laboratory of Land Use Mobility and Environment
DICEA - Department of Civil, Architectural and Environmental Engineering
University of Naples "Federico II"
Piazzale Tecchio, 80
80125 Naples
web: www.tema.unina.it
e-mail: redazione.tema@unina.it

Given the short time to produce the volume, the Editorial Board of TeMA Journal carried out the scientific quality audit of the contributions published in this Special Issue.

The cover image is a photo collage of some cities during the Covid-19 pandemic quarantine (March 2020)

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TeMA Journal of Land Use, Mobility and Environment

TeMA Special Issue | Covid-19 vs City-20, 105-118
print ISSN 1970-9889, e-ISSN 1970-9870
DOI: 10.6092/1970-9870/6869
Received 19th May 2020, Available online 19th June 2020

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www.tema.unina.it

Questioning urbanisation models in the face of Covid-19

The crisis as a window of opportunity for inner areas

Giancarlo Cotella [a*], Elisabetta Vitale Brovarone [b]

[a] DIST - Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning
Politecnico di Torino, Italy
e-mail: giancarlo.cotella@polito.it
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8445-412X
* Corresponding author

[b] DIST - Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning
Politecnico di Torino, Italy
e-mail: elisabetta.vitale@polito.it
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9030-9188

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic raises questions about the ever-growing urban concentration that characterizes our society, and various experts are pointing out the need to rethink our cities. At the same time, a number of voices advocate for a rediscovery of rurality. However naive they may sound, these claims have the merit of calling for a thorough reflection on the challenges and potentials that alternative modes of urbanisation could bring along. In order to provide a contribution in this direction, the article introduces the challenges that the present sanitary emergency raises for contemporary urban environments, to then reflect on the reasons behind the progressive abandonment of remote rural areas, and especially on the increasingly scarce accessibility to services offered to their inhabitants. The authors argue that policies dedicated to counteracting these trends are needed in order to enhance the overall resilience of our societies. To address this concern, the National Strategy for Inner Areas, promoted by the Italian Government to trigger place-based territorial development in remote areas of Italy, is a promising way forward, and the present crisis constitutes a window of opportunity to further strengthen and refine the Strategy's approach in view of the next EU programme development period.

Keywords

Urbanization; Rural development; National Strategy for Inner Areas; EU cohesion policy; Covid-19

How to cite item in APA format

Cotella, G. & Vitale Brovarone, E. (2020). Questioning urbanisation models in the face of Covid-19. *Tema. Journal of Land Use, Mobility and Environment*, 105-118. http://dx.doi.org/10.6092/1970-9870/6869

1. Introduction

The relentless march of urbanization has a long history. According to the European Environment Agency, since the mid-1950s the total surface area of cities in the European Union (EU) has increased by 78%. Over 4 billion people live in cities today, six times as many as did in 1950, and in 2009 the proportion of urban population became larger than the one living in the countryside for the first time in human history. When it comes to the EU, in 2019 this share accounted for almost 75 percent of the total, and scenarios for the year 2050 forecast an additional 10 points increase.

Until a few months ago, these trends were considered irreversible and even desirable. The downsides of increasing concentration and urbanization were often considered as minor drawbacks, when compared to the advantages the latter brings along in terms of economies of scale, access to diverse skills and services, interconnectivity and leisure. Since the Covid-19 emergency crisis struck, however, a number of experts from various disciplinary fields started to reflect on the fragility and vulnerability of our consolidated way of living, raising overarching questions on the ever-growing urban concentration that characterizes our society. A number of ways forward have been suggested, ranging from a reconceptualization of urban mobility towards more sustainable means of transport to alternative approaches to public and working spaces in the city. Other claims went as far as pointing out the need for a more drastic paradigm shift, advocating in favour of the resettlement of underpopulated or abandoned rural areas. Whereas these arguments appear sound or, on the contrary, rather naive and insufficiently grounded in scientific evidence, they at least have the merit of bringing attention to the need to explore more thoroughly the implications of the current emergency situation for mainstream urbanization trends, and to start considering the challenges and opportunities that alternative models could bring about.

In order to provide a preliminary contribution in this direction, this article reflects upon the actual viability of more dispersed urbanization alternatives from an accessibility studies perspective, to then highlight the potential role that the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas could play in this regard. After this brief introduction, the challenges that the present sanitary emergency raises for contemporary urban environments are briefly presented, also in the light of the arguments recently brought forward by a number of experts. The argument advocating a return to more dispersed models of urbanization are explored more critically in section three, with particular reference to their actual viability *vis-à-vis* the reasons that have led to the progressive depopulation and marginalization of rural areas, their scarce accessibility to services of general interest and the increasing dependence on urban nodes. The authors argue that, if more dispersed modes of urbanization are to be pursued, policies specifically dedicated to counteract these trends and to enhance the actual liveability of remote areas should be undertaken. In this regard, section four presents the National Strategy for Inner Areas (Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne – SNAI), promoted by the Italian Government to exploit multilevel synergies between European, national and local actions and resources, as a promising, innovative way forward. A final section rounds off the contribution, by reflecting on how the present crisis represents a window of opportunity to further consolidate and strengthen the role of SNAI in the national policy environment, in particular in view of the next EU cohesion policy programming period.

2. The end of urbanisation as we know it?

There are undoubted advantages to urban life. Concentrating large numbers of people in small areas means larger workforce with more diverse skills, easier access to mass transit, and economies of scale in everything from public services to cultural institutions to private business. Similarly, concentration of people is a good ecological principle in dealing with climate change, by saving on infrastructure resources. It is also a good thing socially, as people are exposed to others unlike themselves in a densely diverse city. Whereas those

dynamics explain much of why incremental urbanization trends are a longstanding global phenomenon that hasn't been challenged by any credible alternative, now that the Covid-19 emergency has gone on for some time, a growing number of arguments started to emerge, questioning ever-growing urban concentration and dependence on density (Stier et al., 2020). More in particular, the pandemic is challenging us to think about city issues from a different perspective and, by questioning physical and relational density, it calls into question the agglomeration effects constituting the very rationale behind the existence of cities. To prevent or inhibit future pandemics, we may need to find different physical forms for to address the density issue, permitting people to live, work and communicate even as they temporarily isolate. The way people move in cities also presents a number of challenges, with the benefits of public transport consisting in efficiently massing numbers of commuters together, which however isn't a healthy form of densification (Serafimova, 2020). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the pandemic is at the same time unfolding as a natural experiment in class inequality, with the possibility of smart-working largely concerning upper and middle-class professions, whereas the low-skilled and unregistered labour force finds itself in precarious economic positions and is more likely to be exposed to potentially unhealthy conditions, both physically and mentally (Sennet, 2020). Finally, additional concerns arise in relation to those tourism-based and sharing economies that, after having changed the soul of our cities in the last decade or so, are now challenged with an unprecedented crisis that will be hard to overcome (Gössling et al., 2020).

This flags up the need for a radical rethinking of urbanization dynamics, that reconcile and integrate multiple dimensions, such as environmental needs and health, economy and social justice (Batty, 2020; Sennett, 2020). Numerous experts already started to provide tentative inputs in this direction, reflecting on what alternative models of urbanisation could look like. In his letter to the President of Italy Sergio Mattarella, the Italian architect Massimiliano Fuksas underlines the need for a habitat that is better prepared to face global pandemic, in which housing and health functions are further integrated and connected, so that inhabitants would feel safer and less isolated (La Stampa, 2020). On a similar line, Ware et al. (2020) propose their concept of "elastic city", an urban system that could be easily fragmented in independent blocks in case of epidemic crisis or other emergencies. In so doing they argue at the same time that the way we conceive and use spaces is also becoming a subject of debate, whereby increased attention should be dedicated to ensure all citizens have access to collective, semi-public spaces such as balconies, staircases, green roofs, courtyards etc. Additional considerations are put forward on the possibility to temporarily change the use of spaces that, during the crisis, have lost their function. Hotels and cruise ships could be turned into hospitals and shelters, restaurants into food charities, office buildings into housing. In particular, a number of authors are reflecting on how the economic crisis that will follow the pandemic may be an occasion to structurally intervene in the housing sector, by ensuring more equal housing conditions through the reuse of those urban proprieties that will lose their short term rental function due to contraction of the tourist sector and those office spaces that may become redundant in the perspective of more flexible smart and home-working arrangements (Coppola, 2020)[1]. Strong public intervention is invoked to make it again convenient to reside and work in the city centres, and in so doing inverting the touristification trends that have expelled residents from the most attractive areas of our cities (Leon, interviewed in Erbani, 2020).

In parallel to the reflections on what future is awaiting our cities, a number of authors started to focus their attention on how the present crisis could change the existing relations between cities and what lies outside them. In two interviews recently released to the Italian Journal *La Repubblica*, Rem Koolhas and Stefano Boeri argue in favour of an abandonment of present urbanization models, in favour of the valorisation of rural spaces and villages (Giovara, 2020; Piccoli, 2020). In particular, as argued by Boeri in relation to the Italian context,

[1] For an overview of the impact of the Covid-19 emergency on the housing debate see: Rogers & Power, 2020.

the almost 6.000 municipalities of the country that count less than 5.000 inhabitants and the 2.300 abandoned villages represent an opportunity for facilitating a contraction of present urbanization trends in favour of further social and physical dispersion. This rediscovery of the rural has been already criticised from various sides, and depicted as a bucolic, naïve argument that willingly forgets to engage with the actual conditions and challenges that have progressively led to the abandonment of the country's rural areas since the end of World War II (for a critique see: Chiodelli, 2020). Be that as it may, the centrifugal perspective that underpins them has at least the merit of opening up an alternative standpoint from which to observe the implications that the current emergency situation may have for mainstream urbanization trends, one that is not exclusively centred around urban cores but that shifts the focus of attention towards urban-rural relations and the challenges and opportunities that a rediscovery of rurality would bring about.

3. Rural beyond rhetoric. Process and challenges undermining rural liveability

In the face of the emerging claims towards a return to (a renewed) rurality, it is worth reflecting why rural areas have undergone marginalization processes, and how such processes affected the liveability of those areas. Rural areas, and rurality in general, can take on various meanings. Since the second half of last century, rural studies tried to define and conceptualise the rural, from functional positivists attempts of delimitation to a post-rural social construction of space (Gallent & Gkartzios, 2019; Gray, 2000; Woods, 2009). Some, Hoggart first, even questioned the conceptual inappropriateness of the notion of rural itself (Hoggart, 1990), while others suggested more nuanced consideration of rural spaces, beyond public imagination of rural archetypes, introducing notions and labels, such as the rural-urban continuum (Pahl, 1966), rurban, non-urban, shadow landscapes (Bryant et al., 2011) and so on. In its overview of regional and rural planning, the OECD identifies three key steps in the definition of the rural: the old paradigm, in which the rural was the non-urban, the new rural paradigm, from 2006 onwards, in which the rural comprised a variety of distinct types of places, and the "rural policy 3.0", that distinguishes three types of rural areas depending on their being within, close or far from a functional urban area (OECD, 2016, cited in Tomaney et al., 2019). For the sake of simplicity, and agreeing with scholars who challenge the delegitimization of the distinction of the urban from the rural and acknowledge the relevance of the latter as an ontological category rather than a residual backdrop of the former (Gallent & Gkartzios, 2019; Scott et al., 2019a; Urso, 2020), this article refers to the "rural" in its widest meaning, from near-urban hinterlands to remote wilderness (Gallent & Gkartzios, 2019), insofar as it applies to processes and phenomena mentioned below.

Since the second half of the last century, many European rural areas have undergone intense processes of marginalisation (Camarero & Oliva, 2019; Johnson & Lichter, 2019; Montalvo et al., 2019; Vasta et al., 2019; Viñas, 2019). The attraction exerted by urban nodes, in particular towards active population groups, has progressively emptied these areas, where, as a consequence, the ageing index has increased. Depopulation is the main phenomenon that is usually reported when considering the marginalisation of rural areas. In this light, the ESPON ESCAPE project distinguishes two types of shrinkage: active shrinkage, driven by migration, and legacy shrinkage, driven by distorted age structures resulting from former migration processes (ESPON, 2019). As the project points out, active shrinkage is more typical in Central and Eastern European countries as well as in Southern Europe, while legacy shrinkage is recurrent phenomenon in Western European fringes. Together with depopulation, a number of other factors contribute to reinforcing the marginalisation of rural areas, and the consideration of social, economic and cultural aspects can allow for a better conceptualisation

– hence understanding – of the issue[2]. Processes of de-anthropisation of natural and open spaces, weakening of social ties and loss of cultural values and identity are key aspects of the impoverishment of rural areas.

In addition to the attraction exerted by urban nodes on rural dwellers, urban-rural relations have evolved over the last century into a complex system of interactions, and a large body of literature has addressed urban-rural linkages from various points of view (e.g. the recent H2020 ROBUST, and among others Funnell, 1988; Healey, 2002; Woods, 2009). Despite the variety of perspectives and insights, the majority of contributions acknowledges a predominant role of the "urban" side of this relation. As a matter of fact, also as a consequence of increasing globalization, urban society has somehow expanded into rural society. Materially, with a proliferation of second homes and accommodation facilities for the exploitation of rural assets for tourism and leisure (Gallent, 2020); but also importing economic, political and cultural models, hence influencing local values, identities and ambitions from an urban perspective. Through the decades, the value of rural areas as places of production has given way to their attractiveness as places for consumption for tourism and leisure (Gallent & Gkartzios, 2019). All these processes induced a progressive rarefaction of the rural *civitas*, i.e. "the set of social ties, functions, services and institutions capable of offering citizens the advantages of a civilized life" (Dematteis, 2009). Services and amenities – basic services such as schools and health services, but also small stores, banking services, libraries, bars, etc… – have progressively decreased since the second half of the last century, as the number of potential users needed to ensure their provision was no longer met (Camarero & Oliva, 2019; Küpper et al., 2018). The dismantling of services and activities became part of an overall spiral of decline, in which the dependence of rural dwellers on urban nodes is both a cause and a consequence.

Accessibility and mobility are undoubtedly key aspects to understand the marginalisation of rural areas. Due to their geographical connotation and settlement pattern, rural areas are characterised by low accessibility in comparison to urban contexts. A pattern of small towns and villages with low density and a scattered social fabric make traditional public transport services inadequate and inefficient, due to low and dispersed demand (Bacci et al., 2020; Daniels & Mulley, 2012; Davison et al., 2012; Farrington & Farrington, 2005; Li & Quadrifoglio, 2010). Not surprisingly, most of the people who live, work or come to these areas for leisure, travel by car. High car-dependence and scarcely efficient public transport services are two sides of the same coin, and the users most affected by this situation are those who do not own or cannot drive a car (Binder & Matern, 2019; D. Gray et al., 2001; Mattioli, 2014; Shergold et al., 2012; Verma & Taegen, 2019; Vitale Brovarone & Cotella, 2020). This gap concerns both mobility within rural areas as well as to/from the nearest urban centres, where basic services are located (Black et al., 2019; Ferreira et al., 2007; Shergold & Parkhurst, 2010). Moreover, in spite of the widespread stereotype of rural areas as places of slowness and low mobility, the lack of essential services and distance between activities implies the need for high mobility (Camarero & Oliva, 2019). While digitalisation could be a way of improving rural accessibility to de-materialised services, these areas very often suffer from lack of adequate infrastructure and expertise, adding further complexity to the issue (Philip et al., 2017).

Whereas said challenges are largely agreed upon, they continue to remain marginal in the scientific debate and only a minority of contributions focuses on exploring solutions to face them. In the last decade, planning theory and practice have been increasingly dominated by urban issues, while rural concerns – with few exceptions, the British academia having historically been at the forefront (Gallent & Gkartzios, 2019) – have been largely overlooked. As a consequence, spatial development policies have progressively left rural development issues behind, while most of the attention and efforts were concentrated on urban cores as engines of growth, this leading to the consolidation of a feeling of abandonment in rural actors and communities, belonging to places that "do not matter" (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Despite the emergence of the

[2] For instance, a rural area gaining population may also undergo marginalization, when an increasing number of its residents daily gravitate on urban nodes and just populate the area without inhabiting it.

city-regionalism paradigm, that in principle should identify and exploit synergies between urban and rural objectives, a city-centric approach continues to prevail, that further marginalises rural areas and reinforces existing centralities and hierarchies (Jonas & Moisio, 2016; Urso, 2020). Due to the limited resources and low level of institutional capacity, local policy-makers most of the times dedicate their efforts to micro-scale, short-term goals or conflicts (Scott et al., 2019b) and, with few exceptions, remain distant from the decision-making arenas responsible for developing wide-ranging, long-term development policies. As a consequence, rural development remains largely grounded on a limited knowledge and understanding of the needs of rural areas (Cotella & Vitale Brovarone, 2020; Harrison & Heley, 2015; Urso, 2020).

All the issues brought forward in this paragraph contribute to weaken what Gallent defines as the "rural infrastructure", a multi-scale and cross-domain concept comprising the range of public and private, community and social infrastructures conveying health, education, transport, as well as enabling social ties through community groups and local networks (Gallent, 2019). The weaknesses of these rural infrastructures affect wellbeing and social equity, undermining the liveability and potential for development of rural areas.

4. Towards place-based rural development. The Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas

The elements and processes described in the previous paragraph give an idea of how hard living in rural areas can be, especially in remote ones. Let alone equipping these areas to sustain incoming flows of counter-urbanisation, also addressing the problems that hamper the liveability for people who already live there poses various challenges. To make rural areas more liveable, and to counter the marginalisation processes they are undergoing, dedicated policies should be put in place. While there have been a number of good practices, in most cases they remain anecdotal success stories, whose positive outcome largely relies on extemporary opportunities and conditions, hence preventing upscaling or replication elsewhere.

National and supranational policy approaches aiming at instituting a structural framework to address the marginalisation of disadvantaged rural areas could produce a more widespread impact, assuming that they are flexible enough to accommodate local conditions and logics. An attempt to reformulate the EU cohesion policy in this direction, in turn providing an input to national and regional policy-making in the various EU member states[3], dates back to more than a decade ago. More in detail, publication of the so-called Barca Report (Barca, 2009), commissioned by DG Regio Head Danuta Hübner in 2007, argued for a place-based reformulation of the EU cohesion policy, that would allow for further local experimentalism, actor mobilisation and overall valorisation of local territorial capital. Deeming the long-standing dichotomy between cohesion and competitiveness as misconceived, the proposed approach foresees mutual reinforcement between efficiency and equity objectives. The innovation of the EU cohesion policy is envisaged through an integrated architecture involving inter-institutional agreement on a common EU strategy for the sectoral policies with place-based relevance, the creation of inter-DGs task forces and, most importantly, the strategic and operational integration of the regional, cohesion, social and rural funds. The place-based approach works from the assumption that places suffering from marginality and underdevelopment have, to a large extent, the necessary knowledge to get out of this condition. At the same time, it argues that the choice – therefore not necessarily the inability – not to put this knowledge into play, stems to a large extent from local hierarchies of power, and the will of ruling classes to maintain their privileged positions (Barca et al., 2012). For this reason, the approach proposes a strong central action, destabilizing and questioning the power dynamics and balance rooted in local systems,

[3] For an overview of the mutual influences linking EU and national policy-making in the field of territorial governance and development polices see: Cotella & Janin Rivolin, 2015; Cotella et al., 2015).

to then oversee a process of rebalancing and territorial growth. Policies for territorial development should therefore consist in promoting in each place integrated investment projects and even more institutional growth, through a process of breaking the economic and social balance, to then re-orient and recompose it through multi-level governance (Barca, 2009; Celata & Coletti, 2014).

Despite its potential, the impact of the Barca Report on cohesion policy has been rather limited; the Commission's proposals for the 2014-2020 period have not been able to fully implement the rationale of the document and fell short on a coherent place-based approach (Becker, 2019; Mendez, 2013). Nevertheless, thanks to the considerable leeway granted to Member States in the actual implementation of the EU cohesion policy and, in particular, to the appointment of Fabrizio Barca as Minister for Territorial Cohesion in 2011, the place-based approach breached into the Italian policy-making arena. One year later, the launch of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) initiated a fertile season of experimentation for the country's regional development policy (Cotella & Vitale Brovarone, 2020).

4.1 Objectives, approach and operational features

The SNAI places itself as a one-of-a-kind experience in Europe, thanks to the way it consolidates the EU place-based approach into a national regional policy.[4] It targets those territories that are located at a significant distance from centres providing essential services, that are typically remote and sparsely populated, affected by severe ageing, depopulation and impoverishment (Barca *et al.*, 2014). At the same time, it acknowledges that these inner areas often feature important environmental and cultural resources that the local population struggle to preserve. Targeting areas located in all regions of the country, the proposed approach to regional policy constitute an important paradigm shift in the country's policy environment, as it abandons traditional interventions aimed at bridging the development gap between the northern and southern part of the peninsula, while acknowledging access to services as an essential precondition for development throughout the whole country (Cotella & Vitale Brovarone, 2020)[5].

The overall aim of the Strategy is to invert the marginalization processes that characterises the concerned areas, by acting towards a reinforcement of their economic and structural conditions. To reach this goal, it sets three interrelated objectives: (i) to preserve and secure the territory; (ii) to valorise its natural and cultural diversity and (iii) to enhance the potential of under-utilised territories and resources.

More in detail, SNAI is characterised by a twofold action, that aims at exploiting synergies between top-down and bottom-up development initiatives (Barca *et al.*, 2014). On the one hand, it focuses on the improvement of essential services, by putting in place top-down actions to provide inner areas with the necessary 'prerequisites' for territorial development in the fields of health, education and mobility. On the other hand, it triggers local development processes, by supporting projects focused on environmental sustainability, promotion of local cultural and natural capital, agro-food systems, renewable energies, craftsmanship and traditional know-how. Following the principle of concentration inspired by the EU cohesion policy (Barca, 2009), SNAI does not act on all the municipalities classified as internal, but concentrates on a limited number of project areas, appropriately selected by region on the basis of a preliminary classification that follows national criteria. More in detail, the selection of the areas is grounded on a thorough methodology defined by the Technical Committee for Inner Areas (CTAI), that first mapped the 'service centres' of the country on the

[4] To the authors' knowledge, to date there are very few examples of nation-wide place-based policies in European countries (for instance, the recently launched National Strategy Against the Demographic Challenge, in Spain. Ministerio de Política Territorial y Función Pública, 2019; Camarero & Oliva, 2019). To this respect, Italy is a prominent case, since the logics of the report trickled-down from the European to the domestic arena, turning the country into a test-bed for the place-based approach.

[5] For the first time in the history of Italian regional policy, the potentials of the national polycentric settlements structure for fostering development are valorised also in rural and mountain remote areas (Urso, 2016).

basis of the presence of education, health and transport infrastructures, and then classified the remaining municipalities in the light of their distance from such service centres. According to this methodology, over 50 percent of Italian municipalities is classified as either intermediate, peripheral or ultra-peripheral[6], accounting for over 60 percent of the country's territory and hosting almost 25 percent of its population. A further investigation by CTAI on the presence of specific institutional and cooperation preconditions, a list of eligible areas was compiled and proposed to the regions, with each of them required to formally select the project areas to be involved in SNAI. Each region selected from two to five areas to implement the strategy, on the basis of its own development priorities, leading to a pool of 72 project areas (Figure 1) that include more than 1,000 municipalities and over 2 million inhabitants.

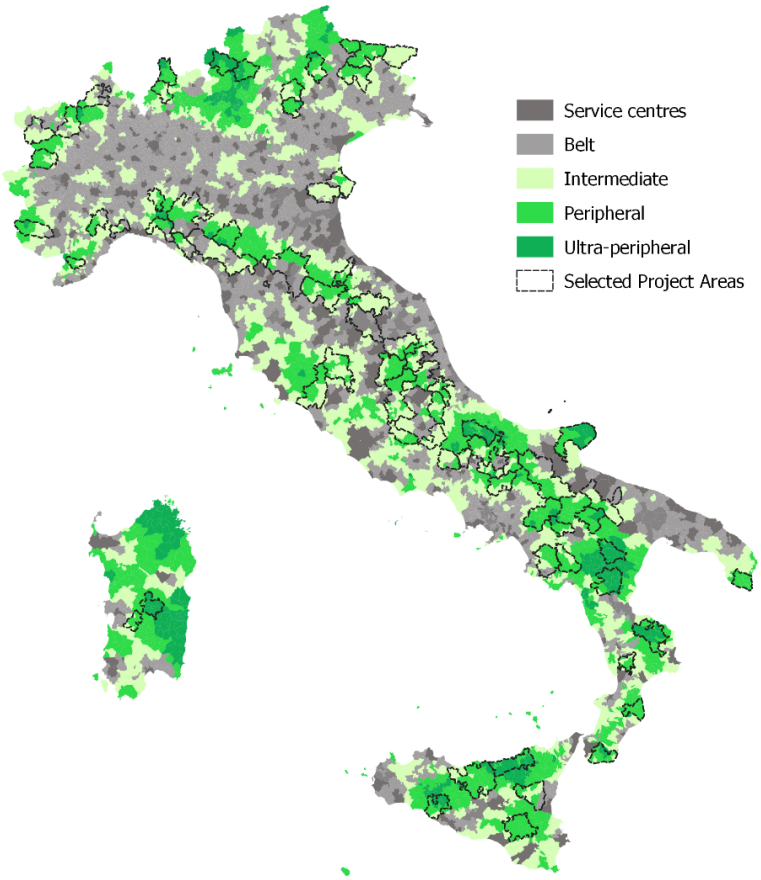

Fig. 1. The 72 areas targeted by SNAI over the total of inner areas. Source: authors' own elaboration on data provided by the Comitato Tecnico Aree Interne (the SNAI technical committee).

All regions were then required to start implementing the strategy. Following a learning-oriented approach, they had to identify a pilot area to test the methodology, to then activate the other project areas in sequence, in order to capitalize on the methodological and operational lessons of those activated earlier. The making of each strategy foresees the organization of a number of focus groups and meetings to involve all relevant stakeholders at the various territorial levels, and especially on the ground. The process begins with definition of a draft strategy by all involved actors, which identifies the guiding principles for development. Then, the strategy is fine-tuned, translating ideas into targets, actions and procedural frameworks. The CTAI supervises each phase and, once it has approved the final version, a framework programme agreement is signed between

[6] That is to say located respectively at 20 to 40 minutes, 40 to 75 minutes or more than 75 minutes from one service centres.

the national bodies involved in the CTAI, the region and the local territorial actors, setting a binding commitment to implementing the identified actions (Lucatelli, 2016).

When it comes to its governance structure, the strategy brings together local actors at the core of the process, requiring at the same time that the organise in formal supralocal associated entities (e.g. Union of Municipalities). Moreover, it awards regional and national actors a coordination and steering role. This makes the SNAI a multilevel, multi-actor and multi-fund process (Cotella & Vitale Brovarone, 2020), acting as a coordination platform between domestic (mostly national and regional) and European resources[7] . More in detail, the Strategy acknowledges the national level as the most suitable for the provision of prerequisites for development, and the local level as the best standpoint to identify the potentials for local development. In this light, interventions in the field of education, health and mobility are funded nationally[8], whereas local development projects are defined by local actors and funded with European funds. The regions act as key nodes, since they manage both the Regional Operational Programmes (ROP) and the Rural Development Programmes (RDP) and they decide on the amount of ESIF to be devoted to SNAI through such programmes. Furthermore, they flag up the strategic objectives of the strategy, define its timeframes and set aside the financial resources.

4.2 Improving essential services: health, education and mobility

Access to adequate citizen rights such as health, education and mobility is a necessary precondition for the development and liveability of inner areas. This is particularly true in the face of the sanitary emergency we are challenged with, that has been clearly showing how the lack of health infrastructure in specific areas may lead to a rapid escalation. SNAI appears aware of this need, and its very essence is based on the argument that, unless adequate provision of services is granted to inner area inhabitants, it would be pointless to invest in development strategies valorising local resources (Barca et al., 2014).

In particular, the distribution of health services across the territory is very relevant to considerations on urbanisation patterns and trends in the face of Covid-19. For some time now the economic and medical literature suggested economies of scale in the production of such services, with increased volumes and higher quality of services, arguing in favour of a centralization of care services in larger and more efficient structures (Barca et al., 2014). Ageing and depopulation are not the best ingredients to keep small hospitals alive in remote areas and, needless to say, unless highly subsidized, larger and more efficient structures have no interest in settling in inner areas where demand is low and accessibility is scarce. This situation led to a general trend of centralization of health services that has been affecting a number of Italian regions as well as other countries in Europe, in turn leading to a situation in which more or less remote rural areas are rich in second homes and potentially of people willing to use them, but deprived of the possibility to safeguard their health in case of explosion of a disease (Gallent, 2020).

To cope with this situation, SNAI envisages a reorganisation of the health system, exploring and pursuing alternatives to hospitalisation, so as to provide practical solutions to support inhabitants on-site, from postoperative monitoring to emergency medicine. The envisaged actions include: assessment of the

[7] The incentives programme defined by the Italian Stability Law is combined with a number of funding programmes from the European Union, dedicated respectively to regional development, rural development, fisheries and social cohesion, for a total of over €1 billion. To date, the total budget devoted to the 37 areas that reached the implementation phase accounts for about €600 million. On average, the EU funds cover the highest share (64.7 percent), followed by national funds (22.3 percent), complementary public funds (6.8 per cent) and private funding (6.2 per cent) (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2019).

[8] These interventions could concern, for instance, the reorganisation of educational facilities with the creation of new facilities in barycentric positions within each area, replacing inefficient facilities spread over the territory; the reorganisation of health provision to provide better access to diagnostic and emergency services; or the adjustment and improvement of transport services, including flexible solutions and better access to rail networks (Barca *et al.*, 2014).

consequences of scarce access to services on specific target groups (e.g.: elderly, women in need of pre-natal care, disabled, …); a distinction between managing emergencies and diagnostic services; identifying and testing targeted services and innovative policy solutions, also by involving local pharmacies and introducing community services (community nursing and obstetrics) and e-services such as telemedicine and telecare.
As far as education is concerned, SNAI starts by acknowledging that schools play a crucial, threefold role: as providers of "decent education that guarantees the substantial freedom, as Amartya Sen states, to decide whether to stay or to go" (Barca et al., 2014, p. 34); as providers of the necessary knowledge, know-how and tools for students to be able to keep living in their territories, also contributing to their local development; as civic centres. Even more than in urban contexts, this threefold role is crucial in inner areas, where education can give a substantial contribution to strengthening the relation between students and their territories. Nevertheless, also in this case, depopulation and marginalisation affected the local education system, with abandonment and precariousness, that often lead to lower scholastic achievement and higher dropout rates. To address these challenges, SNAI envisages a multilevel governance model able to set up and valorise mutual relationships between schools and territories.
Finally, as regards mobility, SNAI foresees two lines of action: improve the provision of services (so as to reduce the need to travel), and improve mobility from and within these areas, so as to reduce the time and effort taken to reach services located in the main hubs. The two sorts of action are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, an integrated approach should be implemented, calibrating the two alternatives based on careful cost-benefit analyses. To help inner areas develop their mobility strategies, SNAI defines four guiding principles: environmental sustainability and flexibility of interventions; coordination of territorial programming and transport planning; careful analysis of demand; consolidation of pilot projects already implemented that produced good results in terms of a qualitative shift toward collective means of transport, reduction of public contribution and technological innovation.

5. A window of opportunity for future urban-rural synergies?

The proposed contribution is placed within the timely debate that is emerging in relation to the impacts that Covid-19 pandemic may have on our societies, and in particular on the way they settle and function in space. In this light, it takes inspiration from a number of arguments in favour of a revision of existing urbanization models, towards alternatives that shift the focus from the urban dimension to the interactions and potential synergies that the latter may establish with the rest of the territory.
This is particularly relevant in a context like the one of Italy, were the so-called inner areas host almost one quarter of the total population and cover more than the 60 percent of the national territory. In this light, the process of socioeconomic marginalization that since the 1950s had progressively undermined the liveability of these areas is certainly a phenomenon that deserves further attention, especially in relation to the role that they could play in a sanitary emergency like the one we are living in, thanks to their lower physical and relational density and their higher environmental quality. More in particular, whereas a number of arguments towards a return to the rural have been put forward in response to the pandemic, they clearly call for a further investigation of the reasons why rural areas have been undergoing intense and tough marginalisation processes for some time. Depopulation, shrinkage and ageing came alongside with loss of active population, de-anthropization and lack of land and landscape protection, as well as weakening of social and cultural identities and ties. Scarce accessibility is a cause and a consequence of abandonment; access to services and amenities is increasingly difficult, opportunities moving away and ability to access them becoming more and more challenging, especially for those who do not own or cannot drive a car. If living in these conditions is hard for those who resisted and keep struggling to live there, the general idea of a migration of urban dwellers

in rural areas as of today sounds at the very least naïve, if not for those few who are really fed up with hustle and bustle of urban life and eager for to turn to a rural lifestyle, with the customary plaid jacket.

Whilst the urban has dominated policy discourse and, even when addressed, rural areas have been subject to urban-centred interpretations and ambitions, the rural cannot be considered as an extension of it, and rural-urban dependences and interdependences deserve specific focus and policies (Scott et al., 2019b). Academics and policymakers are called to a joint effort for an in-depth understanding of and action on rurality, with place-sensitive, multilevel approaches and strategies. In this light, SNAI stands as an innovative experience in a European policy landscape that appears increasingly focusing on urban areas as economic development engines (Cotella, 2019), and could constitute an interesting source of inspiration for national and supranational policymaking in the light of the upcoming program development period (Cotella & Vitale Brovarone, forthcoming). At the same time, its potential contribution to the territorial cohesion of countries is undeniable, as it represents the first attempt put in place to equip rural remote areas throughout the country with the necessary preconditions for livability and to reverse marginalization trends.

Together with its impact and innovation potential, however, one should also highlight the limits that the strategy had revealed when undergoing implementation. Besides its limitations in terms of territorial coverage – the strategy acts on just one third on the eligible areas – some other pitfalls are undermining its potential. In particular, as more thoroughly discussed elsewhere (Cotella & Vitale Brovarone, 2020), its subsidiarity allows for political discretion and discrimination of winners and losers, as well as patronage and discontinuities related to the loss of ownership when political settings are renewed. Moreover, regions being a key player and a connection node between the local and the national level, the various ways in which regional actors are involved in the process can lead to differential results.

On a more general note, and perhaps more importantly, SNAI seems to have lost part of its national prominence, mostly as a consequence of the shifts in government occurred in 2013 and 2014 and the substitution of Fabrizio Barca as Minister for Territorial Cohesion. The subsequent relabelling of the Ministry as "Territorial Cohesion and Southern Italy" could be considered as a litmus test of the loss of political ownership of the strategy at the national level, with a number of policy proposals that seem once again based on the traditional north-south dichotomy. As a matter of fact, the national situation is somehow coupled with the progressive loss of momentum of the place-based approach in the EU political debate. Still, the current situation, even if forced and temporary, may well represent a "window of opportunity" for SNAI and its advocates, a specific moment in time where contextual conditions allow to push forward solutions that would not take root in normal times, as for instance those insisting on a valorisation of inner areas and the potential synergies they could establish with denser urban regions. In this light, the coincidence of the present emergency with the negotiation with the European Commission in relation to the programming period 2021-2027 could lead national and regional policy-makers to turn their attention once again towards the valorisation of urban-rural relations, to be pursued through the progressive improvement of the liveability of rural areas, bearing in mind the enhancement of the resilience of the system as a whole.

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Image Sources

Fig. 1: authors' own elaboration on data provided by Comitato Tecnico Aree Interne (the SNAI technical committee).

Author's profile

Giancarlo Cotella

Associate Professor of spatial planning at Politecnico di Torino. His research focuses on the comparison of territorial governance and spatial planning systems in Europe and beyond and on the mutual influence between EU territorial governance and national territorial governance and spatial planning. More in particular, he explores the evolution and impact of the EU cohesion policy and related programmes and initiatives. Since 2005, he participated in several international research projects on the matter, among which FP7 Milesecure-2050, ESPON COMPASS, ESPON ReSSI, ESPON URRUC, ESPON SUPER, ESPON TANGO, ESPON SMART-IST, ESPON FOCI, ESPON 2.3.1 and ESPON 2.3.2. He coordinates the AESOP Thematic Group on Transnational spaces, policy diffusion, planning cultures.

Elisabetta Vitale Brovarone

Postdoctoral research fellow in Spatial Planning at the Politecnico di Torino, Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning (DIST). Her research focuses on mobility, land use-transport interaction and accessibility, with various approaches, at different scales, in urban and rural contexts. She also dealt with resilience, governance and local development in rural and mountain areas. On these topics, she authored several publications, has had professional experiences and took part in national and international research projects, including COST Action TU1002 Accessibility Instruments for Planning Practice, INTERREG ALCOTRA ARTACLIM Adaptation and resilience to climate change in mountain areas, ESPON URRUC Urban-Rural Connectivity in Non-Metropolitan Regions.