

Revitalization Strategies for Inner Areas in Italy: Constraints and Opportunities from an Analysis of Best Practices

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Abstract

The revitalization of inner areas is a significant issue in the field of spatial and economic planning for sustainability and ecological transition. The settlement model based on the predominance of metropolitan areas has long shown its vulnerability in environmental, functional, economic, and socio-cultural terms. Strategies of revitalization and repopulation of inner areas can contribute to the construction of a better territorial arrangement because they structure a new reticular and polycentric settlement system in dynamic equilibrium with the natural resources present in the area of reference; they can be an opportunity to reorganize living according to “proximity” criteria; they can offer opportunities for maintenance of the rural territory, preserving its biodiversity and preventing hydrogeological and hydraulic risk; they contribute to the protection of essential heritage values. For some years now, a wide range of initiatives aimed at pursuing, among others, the above objectives have been activated in inner areas by institutional or bottom-up initiatives.

This paper presents the outcomes of a study conducted as part of the research project “Regenerating Cultural Landscapes of Inner Areas in a people-centered perspective” carried out by a multidisciplinary team of the University of Florence, involving researchers from the departments of architecture, economics, and educational sciences. In particular, the paper focuses on one of the first tasks of the project, namely the critical analysis of

best practices related to regeneration projects in inner areas in Italy. The article presents the original analysis methodology developed for this research that produced a matrix of meta-criteria and criteria for selecting and evaluating best practices, which can also be used in other research contexts. Next, the article focuses on a selection of four best practices that were analyzed in more depth and summarizes the main findings regarding design strategies, highlighting limitations and perspectives for better regeneration of inner areas.

Keywords

Cultural landscape · Heritage · Sustainability · Marginal area · Integrated territorial development

1 Introduction

For some years, the question of “inner areas”—a term that literally refers to internal areas but broadly denotes marginal and fragile territories distant from essential services and experiencing depopulation—along with the criticalities and opportunities that characterize them, and the related development disparities, has been key themes in the European (ESPON 2017) and Italian context. This is a question not only of study and research, whose emergence is also reflected by the crisis of the forms of representation and consensus due to the polarized modes, urban-centered, and reductive construction of policies (Rodríguez-Pose 2018).

Relating to that, in Italy, in a way that was far-sighted at the time within the framework of national territorial cohesion policies department, the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) (Barca et al. 2014), was devised as a specific policy at national level to address the services availability

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criticalities of inner areas as limit to enable the citizenship exercise, all the more relevant given the characteristics of plurality and widespread “marginality” of the Italian territory (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2024).

This strategy allows shedding light on the broader theme of territorial disparities and differences that—“at large”—cross the country and that offers the tools for a new “outside-in” paradigm of observation of local settlement contexts “as a whole” (Carrosio 2019). A decisive and necessary reversal of the look in a phase of profound energy and socio-economic transition that challenges, even in a radical form, traditional “urban-centered” or center-periphery interpretations and images referring to spatial partitions and settlements polarizations that do not really reflect the complexity of the articulations that constitute the Italian territory and its dynamics (Cersosimo et al. 2018).

In this context, the lately elaborated Italian National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PNRR), to be effective, is called necessary to cope with the general plurality and internal diversity of these territories to devise themes, interpretative frameworks, project methodologies, and development “place-based” scenarios and actions (Barca et al. 2012) relevant and fitting with the underlined manifold diversities.

1.1 The REACT Research Project: Goals, Cross-Disciplinary Adopted Methodology and Study Area

In this framework, the REACT research project addresses a fundamental issue related to the study of conditions for defining strategic guidelines and actions aimed at regenerating inner areas by leveraging the value of cultural landscapes. REACT is a competitive research project funded by the University of Florence within the framework of the Italian National Research Program (NRP), titled “Regenerating cultural landscapes of marginal areas with a people-centered perspective: historic villages and rural territories of Casentino area as a laboratory of creativity and innovation” (Università di Firenze 2024). The research explores the multifaceted nature of cultural landscapes, encompassing architectural heritage, cultivated landscapes, natural ecosystems, and communities’ lived experiences and practices. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the project seeks to integrate these dimensions into a cohesive vision that can serve as a foundation for sustainable and inclusive development strategies that enhance the available cultural and human resources. A key focus of the REACT research is the application of its findings to a specific context: the Casentino, an area located within the sub-watershed of the upper valley of the river Arno in Tuscany (Fig. 1). This culturally and environmentally significant area serves as a case study for developing strategies to preserve its unique characteristics while posi-

tioning it as a model for sustainable development in similar contexts.

In particular, the context was also selected for its exemplary plurality, reflecting the characteristics of many Italian peripheral areas, where processes of abandonment, “return,” and fragility coexist with latent potential and innovative energies (Lanzani and Curci 2018).

But also, a territory results from a “multiple genealogy” (De Rossi and Mascino 2020) and a long-lasting process of co-evolution between environmental peculiarities and anthropogenic action. A relationship that, particularly in the Italian context—in the close relationship between forms of living, care for the territory and places, and economic dimension production—has allowed to decline and “condense” through practices of sharing and community cooperation, the “morphological infrastructure” of territories (De Rossi and Mascino 2020, p. 500) in the forms of the “cultural landscape”.

However, it is a process that has expressed itself in the form of precarious living in terms of socio-economic conditions such as jeopardizing its original environmental resilience, a living that has not withstood the impact of modernity and, more in particular, of urbanization throughout the twentieth century (Bevilacqua 2018), witnessed in Italy by the progressive decline and abandonment of hill and mountain colonization and its landscapes.

But it is precisely on these landscapes, on their plurality and fragility (Tarpino 2016), that in recent years, attention has again been focused, even before on behalf of the politics, on the one end on behalf of the “remaining” subjects (Teti 2011) who had never abandoned the “grip” on those territories and, on the other end, on behalf of some newcomers or “returning” inhabitants. The latter, who have put into practice alternative projects and actions of settlement and production, are certainly heterodox and multidimensional compared to the competitive homologation of forms of production and consumption of the “global” market. Projects and actions reveal themselves to be strategic in a more general framework set by the unsustainability and inadequacy of the prevailing strategies of settlement and economic development compared to the challenges posed by the effects of global warming. This is not only in environmental terms but also from the social and economic point of view and, in a broader sense, relating to the requirements to achieve human settlement regeneration (Magnaghi 2020).

This has been reflected, from the point of view of the research activity synthetically presented in this contribution, into the identification of an interpretative and evaluation methodology suitable for grasping the integrated and multidimensional, as well as multipurpose, value of re-inhabiting initiatives and innovative practices in the study area. Initiatives capable of expressing the close relationship between regenerative use of resources, equity of social relations, and

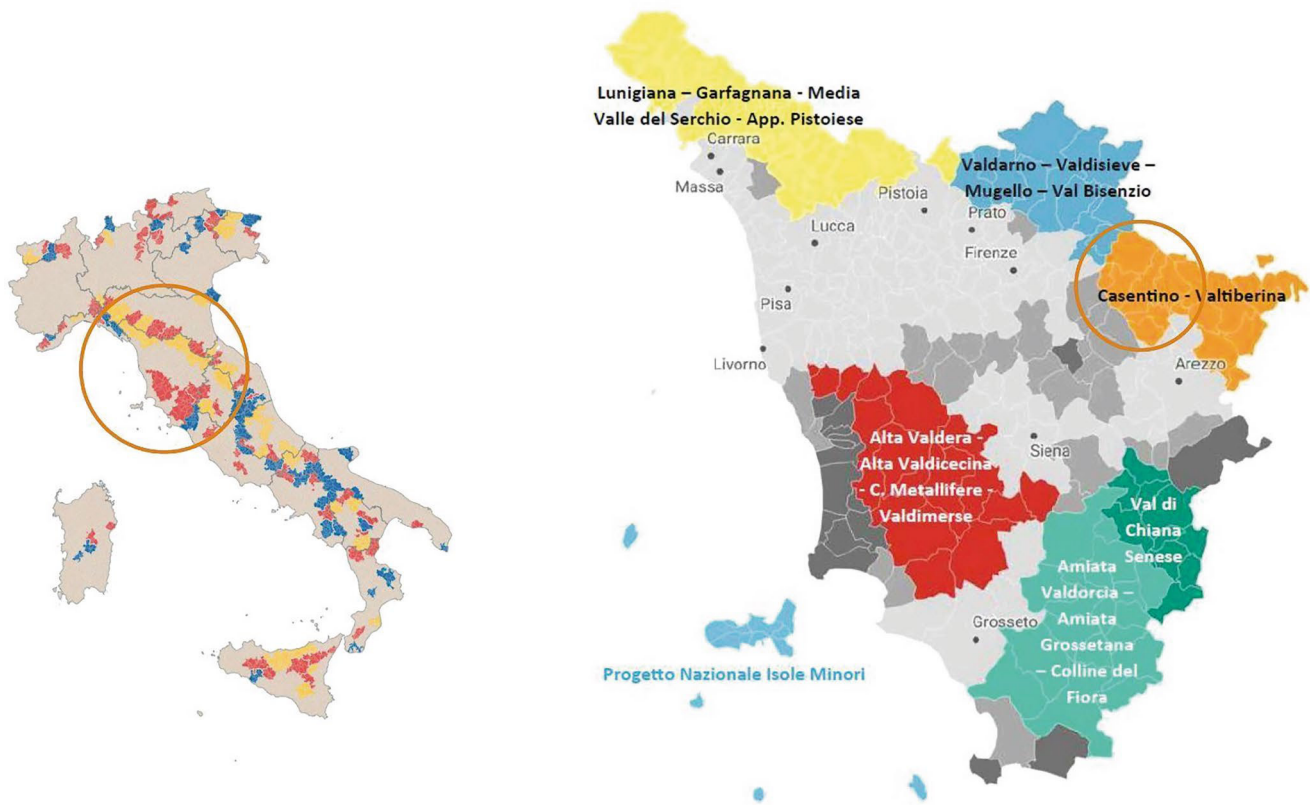


Fig. 1 The Casentino Valley in Tuscany, Italy (Fotina 2023; Regione Toscana 2021)

exchange and social cooperation with the “enhancement” and innovation of the cultural landscapes of Casentino. The methodology has also been devised with the aim of its transferability, that is, suitable for adapting to the plurality of territories of inner areas and to grasp, in any case, the specificities of the different territories in the Italian context.

This paper’s specific objective is to illustrate the development and application of this interdisciplinary methodology. This includes analyzing best practices for evaluating the sustainability of cultural heritage regeneration interventions and critically assessing the success factors and limitations of regeneration processes and projects. By focusing on these elements, the paper aims to provide actionable insights that inform the research and contribute to designing strategies adaptable to other inner areas, ultimately supporting sustainable and inclusive development initiatives.

1.2 The Article Structure

In more specific terms of content, the contribution focuses on one of the first tasks of the REACT research project and, in particular, on defining a methodology relevant to guide the identification and critical analysis of best practices relating to projects for the regeneration of inner areas in Italy. To this

aim, the article presents in the following section the original analysis methodology that was developed for this research, primarily characterized by a matrix of meta-criteria and criteria for the progressive selection and evaluation of best practices identified as being of relevance for the thematic areas on which the research is aimed to set up specific development guidelines. Section 3 then summarizes the main results regarding design strategies that emerged from this analysis, and finally, Sect. 4 presents and comments on the main findings earned and lessons learnt from the selected best practices. That mainly refers to limits and perspectives to outline—in the next REACT research steps—guidelines to devise an endogenous and multipurpose approach to regenerating inner areas’ cultural landscapes.

2 The Methodology to Identify and Study the Best Practices

The methodological pathway that led to the definition of the best practices was a collaborative effort that ped in several stages, from the identification of 46 cases of interest to the study of 20 best practices, and finally to the selection of 4 best practices that were further investigated through interviews and on-site visits (Fig. 2).

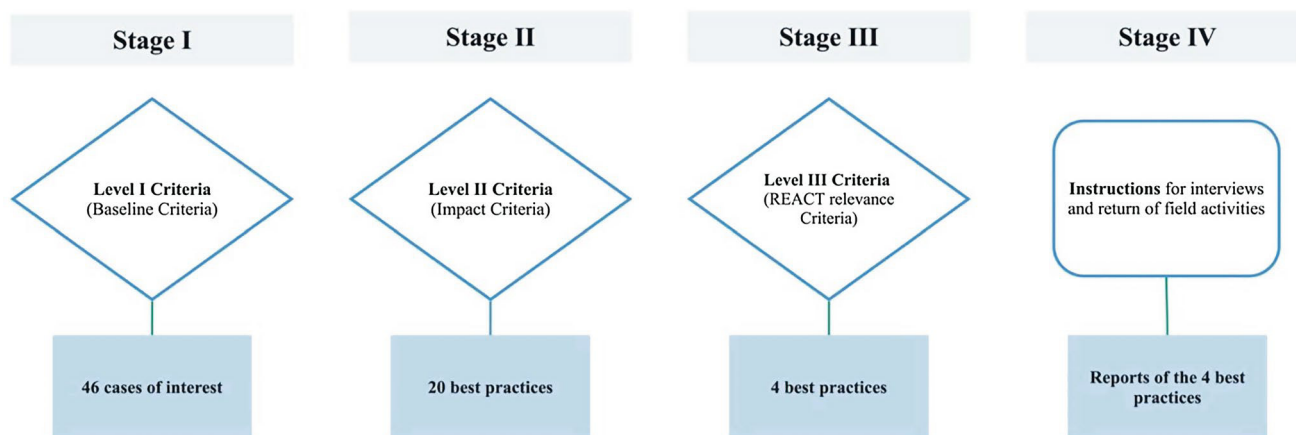


Fig. 2 Stages of the research (by authors)

Table 1 Operational units and thematic areas (by authors)

Operational units	Thematic areas
DISEI for the Department of Economics	A. Agri-food and forestry heritage and local crafts
FORLILPSI for the Department of Education	B. Social traditions and practices
DIDA for the Department of Architecture	C. Landscape and territory
	D. Settlements and buildings

The process involved three different operational units in parallel, which followed the methodological flow and identified the best practices for the thematic areas (TA) in which they had decided to work (Table 1).

2.1 Stage I. Delimitation of the Field of Investigation: Identification of the Pool of Cases of Interest

The work of delimiting the scope of the investigation and identifying the pool of cases of interest began by asking REACT Research Group members to report cases of interest, i.e., initiatives consistent with the scope and purpose of REACT research. Level I Criteria (Baseline Criteria) were applied to identify these cases of interest, which met the following priority parameters:

- Location: Italian inner areas.
- Territorial context: hilly and/or mountainous valley system and plural nature of the territory studied regarding economic vocation and socio-geographical diversity.
- Development strategy: endogenous forms of enhancement of socio-economic heritage and cultural landscape.

Specifically, REACT Research Group members reported 46 cases of interest (22 from the Department of Architecture (DIDA), 13 from the Department of Economics (DISEI), and 13 from the Department of Education (FORLILPSI) consistent with the above priority parameters.

These initiatives were the subject of the working group's in-depth critical work and information integration.

2.2 Stage II. Identification of Twenty Best Practices Based on Their Compliance with Selection Metacriteria and Criteria

At this stage, 20 best practices were selected for desk analysis from the 46 cases of interest indicated by the REACT Research Group members that met the Level I Criteria.

To identify the 20 best practices, an original procedure was prepared based on Selection Metacriteria and Criteria deemed appropriate to highlight the qualifying elements of the regeneration initiatives implemented in Italian inner areas. To this end, Level II Criteria (Impact Criteria) were identified. Specifically, 6 Metacriteria were identified, and each metacriterion was broken down into criteria (Table 2). The matrix is inspired to holistically support the multidisciplinary approach of the research holistically, contributing to a reflection on the cultural landscape, considering the urban, economic, organizational, and educational-cultural dimensions.

To evaluate, compare, and select the 20 best practices, each of the 46 cases of interest was studied and analyzed using the Metacriteria and Criteria and represented through a radar chart. The graph illustrates, for each case of interest,

the simple average of the criteria calculated within each Metacriterion (Fig. 3).

The comparison of radar charts enabled the selection of the 20 best practices based on the following indicators:

- Initiatives that can respond to multiple metacriteria and, therefore, radar charts that cover a larger area.

– Initiatives that stand out because they respond to specific metacriteria and, therefore, radar charts that have higher peaks and values in particular metacriteria.

Through comparison, the territories where the 20 best practices are included were considered complex systems suitable for analysis from a multi-sectoral perspective. This

Table 2 Criteria and parameters for selecting best practices—Stage II (by authors)

Best practices react _ desk analysis		
Level II criteria (impact criteria)		
Stage II Identification of 20 best practices	Metacriterion	Criteria
	II.1 Forms of community organization	II.1.1 Community-based management of resources and services II.1.2 Associations for the promotion of the territory II.1.3 Bottom-up initiatives II.1.4 Self-help networks
	II.2 Forms of governance and policy processes	II.2.1 Multisectorality/integration II.2.2 Multiscalarity II.2.3 Contractual and/or partnership nature (PPP) II.2.4 Propensity towards interterritorial cooperation
	II.3 Mobilization of local resources, social capital, and cognitive assets	II.3.1 Productive retro-innovation in agriculture II.3.2 Recovery of contextual knowledge II.3.3 Creation of personal services II.3.4 Digital transition II.3.5 Multiculturalism II.3.6 Education for sustainable development II.3.7 Education/training/vocational education II.3.8 Creation of services for businesses II.3.9 Initiatives for active ageing II.3.10 Actions for self-reliant endogenous development
	II.4 Generation and distribution of economic value	II.4.1 Access to funding and financial resources: Financial sustainability II.4.2 Economic categories involved and governance modes: Inclusivity and participation II.4.3 Types of goods and services generated and their connection to specific local resources II.4.4 Value creation through the market: Qualification mechanisms II.4.5 Value creation through the market: Forms of sale II.4.6 Value creation through other mechanisms II.4.7 Distribution of value among categories of subjects and territories II.4.8 Ability to remunerate/regenerate the resources used (especially specific local resources) II.4.9 Territorial spillover effects
	II.5 Durable protection/activation of environmental resources	II.5.1 Initiatives for sustainable maintenance and care of the territory II.5.2 Protection and regeneration of biodiversity II.5.3 Development of renewable energy, emission neutrality II.5.4 Processes for circular use of resources
	II.6 Recovery, regeneration, and innovation of the cultural landscape	II.6.1 Recovery of patterns from historic settlement structures (networks of slow mobility and rural settlements) II.6.2 Recovery and enhancement of buildings and works historically functional to forestry, agricultural, and/or artisanal and proto-industrial activities II.6.3 Recovery and enhancement of specific traditional agrarian and forest landscapes II.6.4 Recovery and enhancement of buildings and public spaces of significant cultural and community value II.6.5 Redevelopment of industrial/productive areas II.6.6 Contemporary interventions for the aesthetic and functional enhancement of the landscape II.6.7 Regeneration initiatives of heritage to reverse depopulation processes

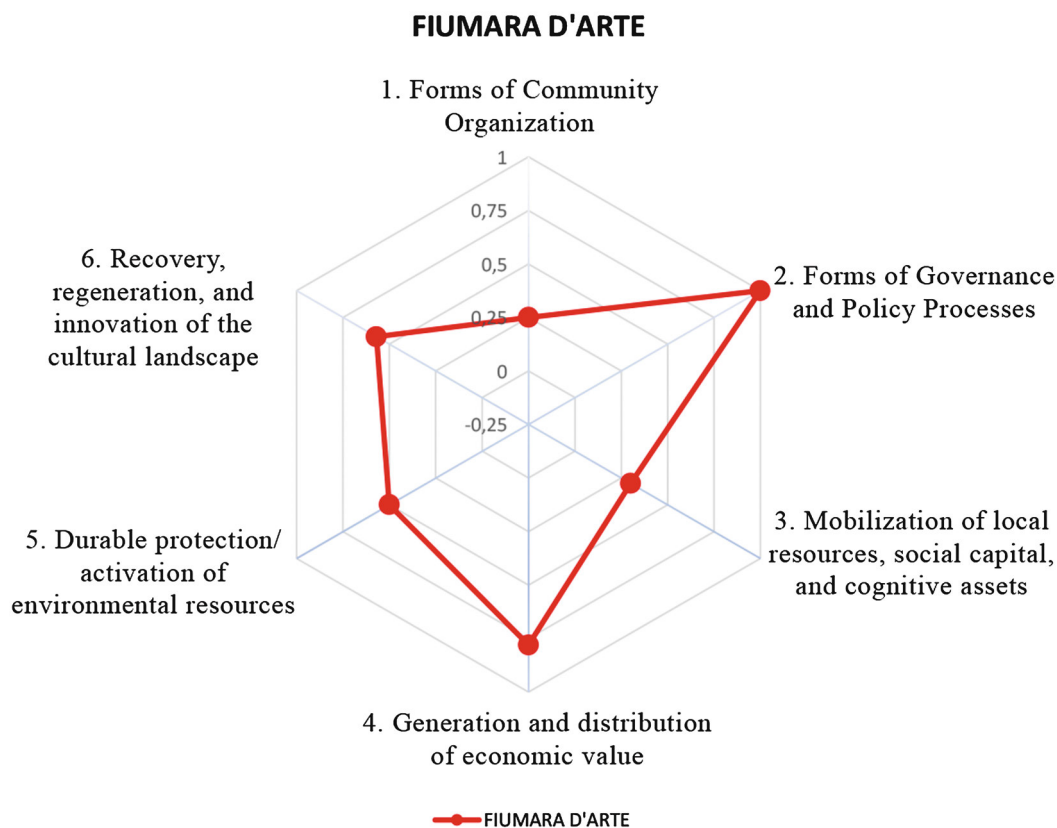


Fig. 3 Example of radar chart (by authors)

brings out endogenous processes, human capital development, enhancement of territorial resources, and examples of community activation that, better than other cases, provide valuable elements for their possible replicability (Table 3).

The 20 best practices identified in Stage 2 were finely analyzed by filling out a specially prepared Analysis Sheet. The Analysis Sheet comprises six parts divided into sections, as shown in Table 4.

2.3 Stage III. Identification of Four Best Practices Based on Their Relevance to the REACT Research

This stage assessed the relevance of the 20 analyzed best practices to the objectives of the REACT research. For this purpose, the best practices were compared with the 4 the-

matic areas and 7 intervention strategies of the REACT research, applying the Level III criteria (REACT relevance Criteria):

- 1.1 Strategies for education and training
- 1.2 Strategies for planning and project
- 1.3 Strategies for social cohesion
- 1.4 Strategies for improving public services
- 1.5 Strategies for knowledge and preservation of cultural heritage
- 1.6 Strategies for the enhancement of cultural heritage
- 1.7 Strategies for management

First, the prevailing thematic area and, if present, the other relevant ones were reported for each best practice. Next, the relevance of each best practice to the REACT Research Intervention Strategies was identified.

Based on the degree of coherence with the thematic areas and the ability to respond to multiple intervention strategies

Table 3 Complete list of cases of interest by the three operating unit (OU) REACT and, in bold, best practices selected through the metacriteria and criteria matrix (by authors)

OU	Case	Name of the initiative	Location
DIDA	01	FIUMARA D'ARTE	Provincia di Messina, Sicilia
	02	RI-AMBIENTIAMOCI	Provincia di Belluno, Veneto
	03	COLLETTA DI CASTELBIANCO	Castelbianco (SV), Liguria
	04	BORGATA PARALOUP	Rittana (CN), Piemonte
	05	OSTANA	Ostana (CN), Piemonte
	06	TEATRO DI ANDROMEDA	Santo Stefano Quisquina (AG), Sicilia
	07	UN PARCO MILLE SOGNI	Provincia de L'Aquila, Abruzzo
	08	SENTIERI APPENNINO MARCHIGIANI	Provincia di Ascoli Piceno, Marche
	09	SCUOLA DI ASTRA ZARINA	Civita di Bagnoregio (VT), Lazio
	10	MATer. ORME DI PIETRA NEL PAESAGGIO	Mamoiada (NU), Sardegna
	11	VAL DI SETTA A BASSA VELOCITÀ	Provincia di Bologna, Emilia-Romagna
	12	PROGETTO BORCA	Borca di Cadore (BL), Veneto
	13	I LIVE IN VACCARIZZO	Montalto Uffugo (CS), Reggio Calabria
	14	BOVA	Bova (RC), Reggio Calabria
	15	OLLOLAI CAPITALE	Ollolai (NU), Sardegna
	16	APPENNINO REGGIANO	Provincia di Reggio Emilia, Emilia-Romagna
	17	ALTA VALLE GRANA	Provincia di Cuneo, Piemonte
	18	FARANETO	Piacenza (RE), Emilia-Romagna
	19	CAIRANO	Cairano (AV), Campania
	20	GANGI	Gangi (PA), Sicilia
	21	CASTEL DEL GIUDICE	Castel del Giudice (IS), Molise
	22	VAL D'ULTIMO	Provincia di Bolzano, Trentino-Alto Adige
DISEI	23	COMUNITÀ DEL CIBO DELLA GARFAGNANA	Provincia di Lucca, Toscana
	24	PULMINO CONTADINO	Provincia di Grosseto, Toscana
	25	CASEIFICIO SOCIALE ALPE DEL GARDA	Tremosine (BS), Lombardia
	26	TURSI DIGITAL NOMADS	Tursi (MT), Basilicata
	27	TUTELA E VALORIZZAZIONE DELLA CILIEGIA DI LARI	Lari (PI), Toscana
	28	VILLAGGIO GLOBALE DI RIACE	Riace (RC), Calabria
	29	COOPERATIVA DI COMUNITÀ "VALLE DEI CAVALIERI"	Ventasso (RE), Emilia-Romagna
	30	TREBALLU RURAL COMMUNITY	Laconi (OR), Sardegna
	31	APT PAGANELLA	Provincia di Trento, Trentino-Alto Adige
	32	COOPERATIVA DI CONSUMO VESIO	Tremosine sul Garda (BS), Lombardia
	33	COOPERATIVA CERROTORRE	Flero (BS), Lombardia
	34	BISCOTTO SALATO DI ROCCALBENGA	Roccalbegna (GS), Toscana
	35	MARCHI COLLETTIVI GEOGRAFICI DELLA VALTELLINA	Provincia di Sondrio, Lombardia

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

OU	Case	Name of the initiative	Location
FORLILPSI	36	PRESIDIO DEL PATTO DEL FIUME SIMETO	Provincia di Catania ed Enna, Sicilia
	37	PROGETTO STUDY CIRCLES-UE	Provincia di Udine, Friuli-Venezia Giulia
	38	MIM. MONTAGNE IN MOVIMENTO	Gagliano Aterno (AQ), Abruzzo
	39	SISTEMA MUSEALE MONTAGNA PISTOIESE	Provincia di Pistoia, Toscana
	40	CONSORZIO MO.TO.R.E.	San Marcello Piteglio (PT), Toscana
	41	ECOMUSEO DELLE ALPI APUANE	Provincia di Lucca, Toscana
	42	FALIA	Provincia di Brescia, Lombardia
	43	MUSEO DELLE MINIERE DEL MONTE AMIATA	Santa Fiora (GR), Toscana
	44	CASERMARCHEOLOGICA	Sansepolcro (AR), Toscana
	45	FONDAZIONE CDSE	Provincia di Prato, Toscana
	46	FONDAZIONE ARCHIVIO DIARISTICO NAZIONALE	Pieve Santo Stefano (AR), Toscana

Table 4 Structure of the best practices analysis sheet (by authors)

Part I	Anagraphy	
	I.1	Name of the initiative
	I.2	Location
	I.3	Inner area
	I.4	Author of the sheet
Part II	Description of the initiative	
	II.1	Brief descriptions
	II.2	Objectives
	II.3	Sponsoring parties
	II.4	Genesis
Part III	Selection metacriteria and criteria	
	III.1	Metacriteria-criteria matrix
	III.2	Radar chart
	III.3	Description of effective criteria
Part IV	Initiative analysis	
	IV.1	Strengths and weaknesses
	IV.2	Lessons learned
Part V	Relevance to REACT research	
	V.1	Relevance to REACT thematic areas
	V.2	Relevance with REACT intervention strategies
Part VI	Sources	
	VI.1	Bibliography
	VI.2	Sitography

among those identified by the REACT research, four best practices, one for each thematic area, were selected for further investigation, including through field analysis.

The identification of the four best practices was made by following two successive steps (Fig. 4):

- Breakdown of the 20 initiatives analyzed by prevailing thematic area.
- One best practice was selected for each Thematic Area.

The best practice with the most relevant links to the seven REACT Intervention Strategies was selected.

Table 5 Presents a synoptic framework of the four best practices in relation to the operational units and thematic areas.

For each of the four selected best practices, themes that emerged during the desk analysis were explored through field analysis (field visits and in-depth interviews). In addition, cognitive integration was carried out through scientific literature and governance tools.

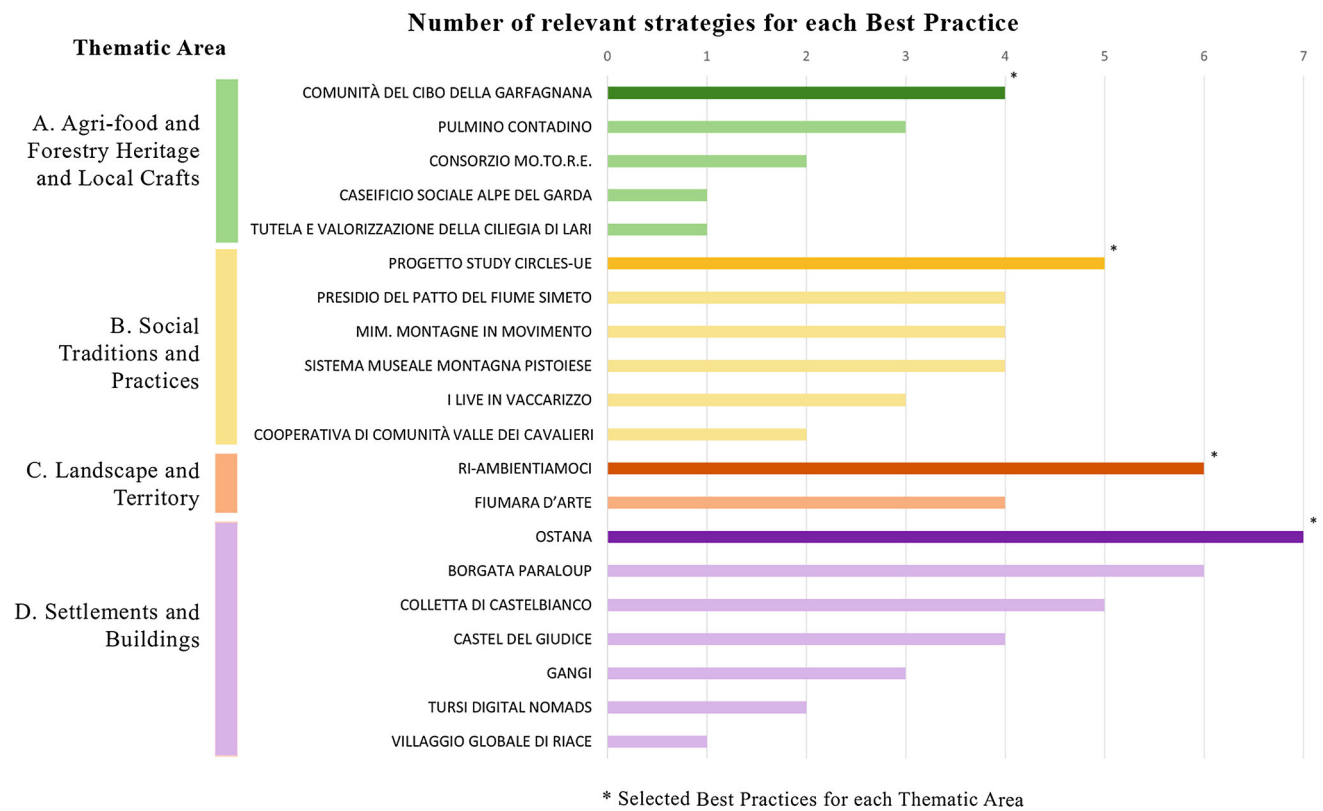


Fig. 4 Relevant strategies for each best practice (by authors)

Table 5 Operational units, thematic areas and the four selected best practices (by authors)

Operational units	Thematic areas	Four best practices
DISEI for the Department of Economics	Agri-food and forestry heritage and local crafts	Comunità del Cibo della Garfagnana
FORLILPSI for the Department of Education	Social traditions and practices	Progetto study circles-UE
DIDA for the Department of Architecture	Landscape and territory	Ri-Ambientiamoci
	Settlements and buildings	Ostana

3 Research Outcomes

3.1 The 20 Selected Best Practices

In examining revitalization strategies for the 20 best practices summarized in Fig. 5, several common characteristics and recurring project actions emerge from successful case studies:

- Community engagement: active involvement of local communities in planning and implementation processes.

- Cultural and natural heritage: emphasis on preserving and promoting local cultural, historical, and natural assets.
- Sustainability: focus on environmentally sustainable practices and renewable energy sources.
- Economic diversification: efforts to diversify the local economy, often through tourism, agriculture, and small-scale artisanal industries.
- Education and training: investment in education and vocational training to enhance local skills and employability.
- Public–private partnerships: collaboration between public authorities, private enterprises, and non-profit organizations.
- Innovation and technology: incorporating modern technologies and innovative approaches to traditional practices.

The thematic area “Settlements and Buildings” is where the best practices are distributed (seven best practices), whereas the “Landscape and Territory” area reports the fewest cases (two best practices). Regarding territorial distribution, the 20 selected best practices are spread across the entire peninsula, with a concentration in the northern and southern regions of the country (Fig. 5).

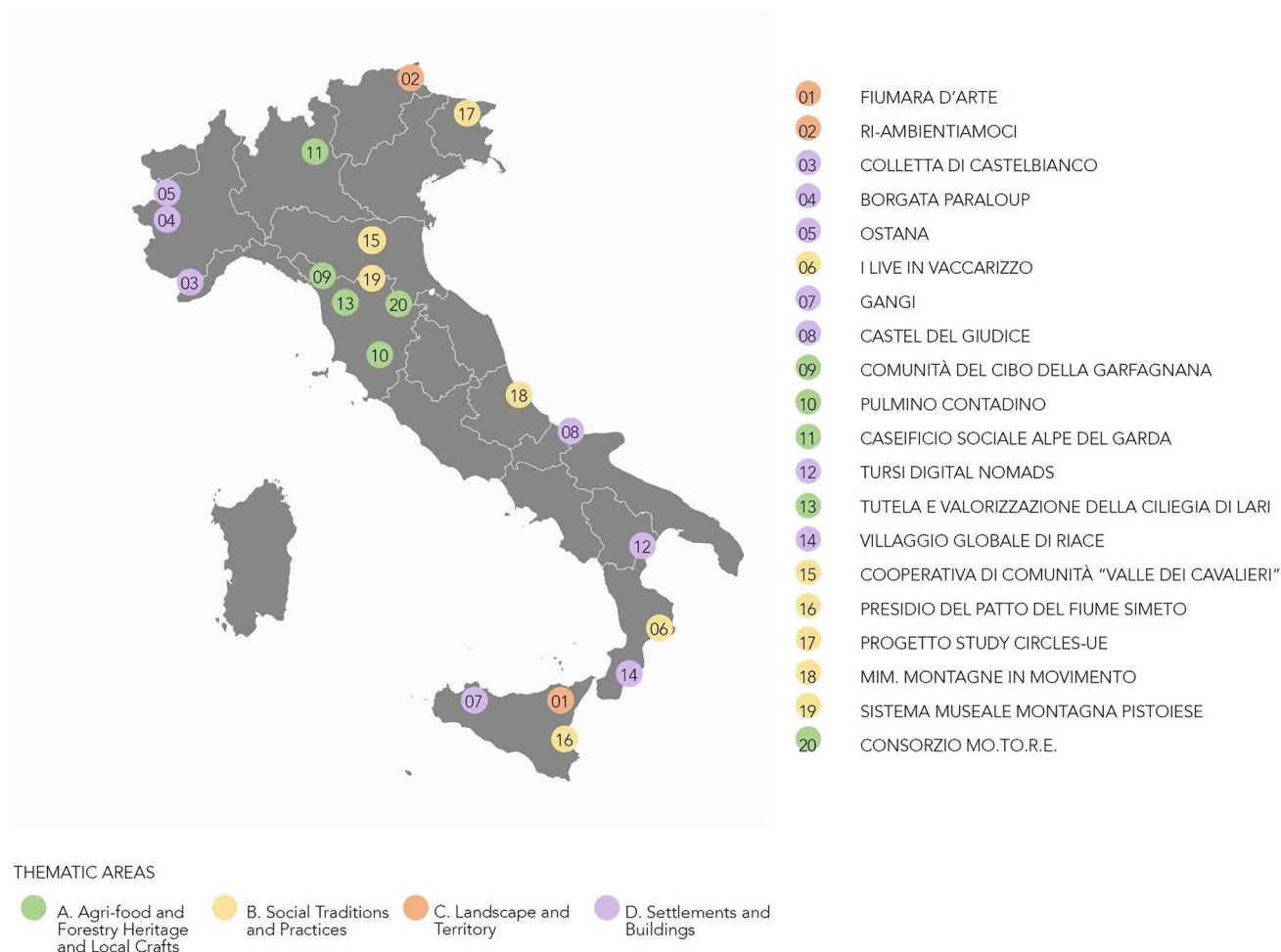


Fig. 5 Synoptic map of the territorial distribution of the 20 selected best practices (by authors)

Specifically, the following best practices were analyzed for the different thematic areas.

The following five best practices were analyzed for the thematic area “A. Agri-food and Forestry Heritage and Local Handicrafts.” The “Garfagnana Food and Agrobiodiversity Community” (Tuscany) is a territorial governance system that brings together a diversity of local actors to enhance the Garfagnana’s agri-food heritage and agrobiodiversity sustainably. “Pulmino Contadino” (Tuscany) is an association that brings together producers and consumers in the area between the “Colline Metallifere, Piombino and Grosseto”, creating a circuit of small-scale organized distribution of agri-food products. “Caseificio Sociale Alpe del Gard” (Lombardy), a cooperative of dairy producers, which processes the milk of its members and handles marketing. “Tutela e Valorizzazione della Ciliegia di Lari” (Toscana), a shared valorization path of local cherry varieties, led to obtaining the PGI denomination. “I live in Vaccarizzo” encompasses projects aimed at repopulating the village of Vaccarizzo in the province of Cosenza. This initiative origi-

nated from a “Social Transformation Laboratory” conducted in 2019 as part of an international experiment by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston.

At the same time, five best practices were selected for the Thematic Area “B. Social Traditions and Practices,” which, better than others, highlight virtuous practices due to their emphasis on community engagement, intangible cultural heritage, innovation, and sustainable development, revitalizing rural communities. The “Presidio of the Fiume Simeto Pact” is a community initiative to safeguard, protect, and enhance the Simeto river valley in Sicily. It involves a network of associations and municipalities in the provinces of Catania and Enna. The “Study Circles-UE Project” is a cross-border initiative to develop human competencies and cooperation networks to promote local resources focusing on knowledge exchange. “Montagne in Movimento (MIM)” in Gaglianico Aterno, a remote mountainous community in Abruzzo, involves the community in promoting endogenous energy transition processes. The “SIMOP (Sistema Museale Montagna Pistoiese)” in the mountainous region of Pistoia,

Tuscany, is a network of museums and cultural sites that preserve and promote the area's rich cultural and environmental heritage. Finally, the "Consorzio Mo.To.R.E. (Montagna Toscana Ricerca Energie)" is a business consortium that develops technologies and promotes knowledge related to renewable energies and the forest economy.

Two exemplary practices were selected for thematic area "C. Landscape and Territory," showcasing diverse strategies and measures to enhance landscape resources in Italy's inner areas. The first, "Fiumara d'Arte", involves the establishment of an open-air land art museum in the province of Messina, Sicily. This initiative, spearheaded by a private individual, commenced in 1982. The second practice, "Ri-ambientiamoci", is situated in Veneto near the Austrian border. Initiated in 2019, this project aims to transform the damage caused by the Vaia storm into an opportunity for community rejuvenation using art as a narrative tool.

Seven best practices have been selected for the thematic area "D. Settlements and Buildings". These practices address the theme of regenerating existing heritage and explore various methods to create social, economic, and environmental value around them. "Colletta di Castelbianco" (Piemonte) is the transformation of a medieval village into a telematic village, which was achieved while preserving the historical and architectural identity of the area. It serves as an example of how urban regeneration projects can address new needs and activate a new community of residents. Narration of memory can be a crucial strategy for enhancing marginal territories. An example of this is the "Borgata Paraloup" (Piemonte), which has utilized various fields to demonstrate how the history of a community can transform landscapes, convey ideas and values, and share modes of communication that transcend territorial boundaries. "Ostana" (Piemonte) exemplifies how a small, formerly abandoned village in an inner area has managed to attract new residents and counteract the negative depopulation trend, mainly due to the collaboration with the University of Turin. "Gangi" is in the interior of the Madonie mountains (Sicily). The municipality has undertaken several successful projects to counteract depopulation and develop a new economic pathway integrating agriculture, livestock farming, and tourism. "Castel del Giudice," a small municipality in the Molise Apennines, represents a virtuous and sustainable example of community-based entrepreneurship for inner areas. The implemented projects demonstrate a productive synergy that has led to the establishment of a public-private participatory management model capable of revitalizing the economic and social life of the community in the village. "Tursi Digital Nomads" (Basilicata) is a project for the valorization and repopulation of the small village of Tursi through the attraction of "digital nomads", i.e., people working remotely in smart working. "Villaggio Globale di Riace" (Calabria) is an innovative project for integrating refugees based on their involvement in

restoring abandoned housing and work activities to repopulate and revitalize the village.

3.2 The Four Selected Best Practices

The four selected best practices are:

– **Garfagnana Food and Agro-biodiversity Community (A. Agri-food and Forestry Heritage and Local Crafts)**

The Garfagnana Food and Agro-biodiversity Community (below FAC), founded in 2017 as a pilot project of the Union of Municipalities of Garfagnana and promoted by the Region of Tuscany within the 2014/2020 Rural Development Plan, was created within the framework of national law no. 194/2015 for the protection and enhancement of agricultural and food biodiversity. It brings together 54 member subjects, including agricultural farms, agri-tourism, operators of the agri-food system, associations, citizens, and local institutions. Food communities respond to the need for a territorial coordination and governance system related to food and agriculture. This generates an integrated and participatory approach to sustainable territorial development of inner rural areas. The FAC aim is the sustainable valorization of the Garfagnana's agri-food heritage and agrobiodiversity, and its objectives include the study, recovery and transmission of knowledge on local genetic agri-food resources; the creation of short supply chains and local marketing circuits for the exchange and purchase of agri-food products; the dissemination of organic and low-impact farming practices; the transmission of traditional knowledge on crops; the creation of educational and social farms as tools for valorizing local varieties, promote environmental education and social aggregation, and the redevelopment of abandoned and degraded farmland. The FAC is an interesting example of how it is possible, through collaboration between different actors, to hold together a territory and its various needs and to be able to coordinate and work together to intercept economic resources to reinvest in the territory itself, building processes of territorial protection and valorization from the bottom up, considering communities and their needs first.

– **Study Circles-EU Project: Study Circles-Cross Border Laboratory for the Development of Human Resources and Cooperation Networks Promoting Local Resources (B. Social Traditions and Practices)**

The "Study Circles-EU" project, aimed at developing human resources and cooperation networks to promote local resources, was selected as a best practice among case studies related to "Social Traditions and Practices". It aligns with the REACT research intervention strategies. Funded under the Italy-Slovenia Cross-Border Cooperation Program 2007–2013, the project revitalized

the “study circles” model for cross-border education and local development, creating a network of educational and training agencies, local development agencies, and institutions from Slovenia, Veneto, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia (FVG). Themes included sustainable agriculture, local product promotion, heritage conservation, revitalization of traditional crafts, and enhancing local knowledge and identity values for territorial tourism and marketing. Led by the National Entity for Professional Training and Education (ENFAP) of FVG, in collaboration with the Department of Educational Sciences and Psychology of the University of Florence, the University of Venice, and the Slovenian Adult Education Centre, the project focused on the inner area located in the valleys of Torre and Natisone, provinces of Gorizia and Udine. The study circle, a pedagogical device used in non-formal adult education, is widely recognized as highly inclusive, supportive of the learner’s active participation, and community-oriented (Bogataj and Del Gobbo 2015). A mentor leads each Study Circle; thanks to the project, the professional figure of the mentor has been defined and classified among the experts in training and curricular planning (Del Gobbo and Federighi 2021). An in-depth interview revealed the importance of ENFAP and the Local Action Group (GAL) synergy in activating the community and the significance of mentor training. The project’s success lies in developing human capital, job creation, and cultural heritage enhancement, with academic involvement elevating the work quality.

– **Ri-Ambientiamoci (C. Landscape and Territory)**

The “Ri-ambientiamoci” initiative has undergone comprehensive analysis within the Thematic Area “Landscape and Territory”. Launched in 2019 in Veneto, near the Austrian border, “Ri-ambientiamoci” aims to transform the scars left by the Vaia storm into an opportunity for reflection on climate change and for enhancing the landscape’s historical, cultural, and naturalistic understanding. The project focuses on improving forest resources through art, striving to balance economic value creation and environmental sustainability. Thanks to the collaborative efforts of the entire community, this initiative, which emerged from a catastrophic event, has successfully turned a disadvantage into an opportunity. The comprehensive analysis included direct participation of project leaders during site inspections in the affected areas. The initiative demonstrates how the complexity of the landscape dimension encompasses a wealth of aspects capable of uniting the community. Driven by pressing needs, the community is motivated to engage and develop new landscape management and enhancement methods. Field activities have highlighted how the expected outcomes during the planning phase conflicted with the realities of

communities still entrenched in outdated approaches to forest resource utilization. The “*Regole*”, traditional community-based organizations in Cadore, collectively own and manage agro-silvo-pastoral assets such as forests, meadows, and pastures. These properties, passed down through generations, are governed by democratic rules outlined in ancient rural codes called “*Laudi*”. This model could offer a valuable framework for managing the silvo-forestry areas of inner regions like the Comelico valleys. However, the current approach remains too tied to tradition and insufficiently flexible to adapt to ongoing changes, preventing innovative initiatives like “Ri-ambientiamoci” from taking root. Another significant factor affecting the outcomes of similar initiatives in this area is regional policies, which have historically invested little in these peripheral territories. As a result, these areas struggle to be recognized as strategic for the country’s development and consequently suffer from widespread depopulation.

– **Ostana (D. Settlements and Buildings)**

Ostana is a small village located at the foot of the mountain Monviso, a virtuous example of rebirth and repopulation. The protagonist of the success was the Municipal Administration, which, starting in the 80 s, prevented the proliferation of new buildings by renovating existing ones and promoting local culture. Thanks to various grants and the involvement of the Politecnico di Torino, the quality of living in Ostana has increased through a series of projects that have improved the modernity of buildings and generated new cultures and businesses while respecting the landscape identity of the place. The numerous interventions of restoration of buildings, spaces, and public equipment for tourism, culture, or local entrepreneurship (e.g., cultural center, school, guest house, wellness center, museum, bakery, dairy, etc.) involved the community and reused local materials. “Viso a Viso”, a community cooperative born in 2020 from a public participation process, manages most of the regenerated structures and guarantees goods and services to the community. It is an innovative model to produce livability, culture, and employment, building a contemporary model for the mountain. The case shows that revitalizing a place needs time, partnership, participation, and targeted investments in facilities, services, and communities. External subjects, carriers of different competencies or experiences, successfully mixed with the original inhabitants. The success of architectural design in the area’s regeneration was due to complementary revitalization paths and a network of public interventions. The reactivation and reuse of heritage were combined with processes to revitalize local communities, establishing a welfare infrastructure (services, culture, tourism, production, and wellness facilities). Nearly

Table 6 Common strengths and weaknesses of the four selected best practices (by authors)

Four best practice: common strengths and weaknesses	
Strengths	Weaknesses
Community involvement – Participation of a diverse range of stakeholders with varying roles and expertise (BP1) – Inclusion and accessibility for different types of users (BP2) – Active engagement of the community (BP3) – Community involvement in decision-making processes (BP4) Public–private collaboration – Network of relationships with local entities (BP1) – Involvement of local public and private actors for integrated development (BP2) – Collaboration between public and private sectors (BP3) – Cooperation and co-design between public and private sectors (BP4) Enhancement of local resources – Richness of the territory in terms of agro-biodiversity and Agri-food heritage (BP1) – Promotion of the cultural heritage of the Valli del Torre and Natisone (BP2) – Creation of an artistic route and revitalization of the timber supply chain (BP3) – Enhancement of architectural and landscape heritage, along with the recovery of traditional knowledge (BP4) Institutional and regional support – Support from the Tuscany region and GAL Montagna Appennino (BP1) – Collaboration with the polytechnic University of Turin and promotion of community enterprises (BP4)	Economic-financial sustainability: – Difficult economic-financial sustainability (BP1) – Lack of stable funding (BP2) – Managerial issues due to external factors such as the pine beetle (BP3) – Dependence on public support and tourism (BP4) Community participation and cohesion – Low collaboration and participation among members, lack of a strong common identity (BP1) – Initial resistance to new learning methods (BP2) – Conflicts between residents and newcomers, difficulties in managing community dynamics (BP4) Training and professionalism – Lack of training for farmers (BP1) – Need for adequately trained professionals (BP2) – Economic difficulties for local businesses in a context with unsuitable regulations (BP4)

40 years of successful policies and strategies, a collective product of internal and external players, have resulted in an interweaving of bottom-up planning, local cultures, networks of expertise, and cooperative systems.

3.3 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Best Practices

The four best practices examined exhibit a range of strengths and weaknesses. These practices, implemented in various local contexts, provide valuable insights for replicating positive experiences and addressing everyday challenges. Table 6 outlines the main strengths and weaknesses of each practice, followed by a summary highlighting common elements.

The analysis of the four case studies highlights a complex landscape of strengths and weaknesses that shape the dynamics of community-based initiatives and territorial development. These case studies serve as valuable examples of how community involvement, public–private collaboration, enhancement of local resources, and institutional support can support inclusive growth and sustainable development. They reveal the transformative potential of diverse stakeholder participation, including various user groups and active community engagement in decision-making processes. Furthermore, the integration and collaboration of public and private actors, the valorization of local cultural and natural

assets, and the strategic role of institutional support underline the multifaceted approach required for success.

However, these practices are not without challenges. Economic and financial sustainability remains a critical issue, with difficulties in securing stable funding and managing external factors that affect viability. Additionally, low collaboration, identity struggles, and conflicts among stakeholders hinder community participation and cohesion. Training and professionalism also emerge as pivotal factors, with gaps in expertise and regulatory barriers posing significant obstacles.

These aspects underscore the importance of integrated and sustainable strategies to ensure the continuity and success of community initiatives and territorial development, promoting inclusive growth and valuing local resources.

4 Lessons Learned and Future Perspectives

The research presented in this paper has shown that, despite many initiatives aimed at revitalizing inner areas and bridging the gap caused by their physical and socio-economic marginality, we are still far from implementing a systematic project on the whole national territory. Best practices often remain isolated, whereas moving from episodic individual interventions to real public policy would be necessary. As

mentioned above, the National Strategy for Inner Areas was heading in this direction but has not yet produced the desired results. A place-based and integrated approach is therefore strongly encouraged.

The analysis of the 20 best practices (and of four studied in more detail) has revealed certain limitations attributable to the following points, from which it is worth starting to identify possible lines of action:

- A still significant demographic gap that characterizes the inner areas makes the social and economic fabric very fragile and less responsive to the systematic engraftment of policies and innovative practices on a large scale.
- The difficulty of developing effective and lasting strategies at the territorial and landscape scale (especially in agroforestry management), compared to settlements and buildings (we observe only two best practices against seven of those studied). This is probably because this scale of intervention covers larger territories and a broader and more complex set of potential actors (public and private) than the building scale.
- The difficulty of developing and managing integrated strategies over time, covering several sectors of economic and public administration (tourism, slow mobility, agriculture, crafts, environment, water management, cultural heritage, etc.).
- The lack of stable funding channels dedicated to developing such integrated strategies across all scales.
- The dependence of these virtuous projects on the initiative of individuals or small self-organized groups, often “outsiders” in relation to the context of intervention, allows them to see new opportunities and perspectives, especially in the field of common goods management. This may entail the risk of experience fading once the propulsive thrust of its promoters is exhausted.

To help overcome these limits, we believe it can be helpful to adopt an approach that puts the landscape and its quality at the center of public policies (Albrechts et al. 2020). In this perspective, the landscape is intended as a self-sustainable, integrated, and participatory local development engine. Moreover, it allows for the increase of consciousness in a new place (Magnaghi 2020). For this vision to be realized, it is essential that landscape policies are no longer seen as a sectoral field of public administration but as the place of integration of different spheres of intervention. Operationally, an essential first step towards making this route a reality could be to give impetus to the drafting of regional landscape plans, which could have a positive effect on the above limits concerning the following points:

- Draw polycentric scenarios in which the inner areas become less marginal in the region, starting from the redevelopment of existing settlements: improving accessibility to these inhabited centers and a better supply of basic services (starting from school and health) can be the

first point of departure to draw a new geography no longer unbalanced on metropolitan areas but with a more balanced distribution of population. The regional scale is the most suitable for designing scenarios that can contribute to the repopulation of inner areas, as in a bioregional key (Fanfani and Matarán Ruiz 2020).

- Develop consistent analytical frameworks and intervention scenarios for territorial systems with specific reference to themes such as agro-forestry management and river system management. All these issues are highly complex both in terms of space and governance. Regional landscape plans could also stimulate the identification of forms of payment for ecosystem services for the fundamental functions that inner areas perform for the entire regional system (first, concerning hydrogeological balance and biodiversity preservation). Some examples can be traced in the experiences based on the co-management of common goods, which economically compensate farmers and breeders as “custodians of the territory” (Carrosio and De Renzis 2021).
- Federate sectoral policies and public administration fields of intervention, strengthening the intersectoral dialogue within the same body (e.g., the region) and between entities at different levels (Region, Municipalities, etc.). In Italy, the regional landscape plans have this role superordinate by law (D. Lsg. 42/2004) compared to other plans and programs that concern the regional territory. For this reason, they can be the place of synthesis of different policies (Gisotti and Tarsi 2023).
- Identify sources of funding for inner areas revitalization strategies independent of the administration’s current spending, like EU funds that are distributed through the Regions. Strategic landscape projects, which are often included in regional landscape plans and deal with topics relevant to inner areas (such as slow mobility networks, green and blue infrastructures, and integrated cultural heritage systems), can be helpful for this purpose (Barbanente and Grassini 2021).
- Promote the development of a broad cultural and educational project on the landscape of the inner areas, conceived as an integrated common good, carrier of multifunctionality and values at the same time historical, ecological, economic, and aesthetic. This project could be developed within the participatory processes during regional landscape plan formation. It could promote dialogue between stakeholders involved in landscape transformations (public administrations, practitioners, entrepreneurs, farmers) and civil society (citizens, schools), and support transferring knowledge and innovations into current practice to move from episodic best practices to a real policy.

The REACT project, which identifies the cultural landscape as a key issue, will be able to develop some of these

topics in its successive phases, dedicated to defining guidelines for the regeneration of inner areas.

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