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# Networks, Markets & People

Communities, Institutions and  
Enterprises Towards Post-humanism  
Epistemologies and AI Challenges,  
Volume 5



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Editors

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Communities, Institutions and Enterprises  
Towards Post-humanism Epistemologies and AI  
Challenges, Volume 5

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**Policies and Practices of Cohesion  
and Social Innovation for Inclusive  
Cities**



# Socio-Territorial Inequalities and Integrated Programming: 20 Years of Cohesion Policy in Basilicata

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**Abstract.** The paper reconstructs the processes of integrated territorial programming within the broader framework of European Structural Funds programming, focusing on the case study of Basilicata within the context of Southern Italy. The paper aims to analyze the implementation of Regional Operational Programs (ROPs) over the twenty-year period between 2000 and 2020 and the transformations in local development policies through the analysis of integrated territorial programming as a tool for implementing the operational programs analyzed. The research employed a multimethod approach. First, a desk analysis was conducted to reconstruct the European, Italian and regional regulatory framework of cohesion policy and integrated territorial programming in Basilicata. Subsequently, a critical analysis of ROPs and territorial programmes was carried out through semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders. The analysis shows that the quality of local administrative structures and political leadership plays a crucial role in the implementation processes of European fund programming and territorial interventions in Basilicata. This region stands out among the others Southern regions, especially in comparison to Calabria, in terms of efficiency in expenditure and institutional performance. Additionally, the research highlights that national strategies supporting local development play a crucial role in territorial programming of local development.

**Keywords:** EU cohesion policy · South of Italy · Place-based local development policies

## 1 The Theoretical Framework

In Italy, at the beginning of the 2000s, regional programming extensively employed integrated implementation tools (from both a sectoral and territorial perspective) and adopted a place-based approach to local development. In the “Agenda for the Reform of Cohesion Policy”, better known as the “Barca Report” (named after its author, an

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economist and official at the Ministry of Economy and Finance) at least four prominent characteristics were identified to determine the measure of success of multilevel governance in cohesion policy. These characteristics systematize the fundamental features of the place-based approach to local development. The identified characteristics encompass the allocation of responsibilities among different levels of government, the role of territories, agreements among the involved government levels, and local decision-making processes within a place-based perspective of development.

Regarding this last point, the term “place-based” refers to a bottom-up perspective of local development that assigns particular importance to places and the specificity of contexts. It gained ground within the framework of institutional decentralization that, in Italy as elsewhere, gained traction during the 1990s. Territories became the focal point of development policies implemented through participative tools that integrated institutional and local socio-economic partnerships [1]. In the Barca Report, it is stated: «A place-based policy is a long-term strategy aimed at addressing the persistent underutilization of resources and reducing persistent social exclusion in specific locations through external interventions and multilevel governance. This policy promotes the provision of integrated public goods and services tailored to contexts and aims to trigger institutional changes» [2]. This perspective implies reference to three aspects: the territorial specificity of natural and institutional resources and individual preferences and knowledge; the role played by connections (both material and immaterial) between places; the consequent need for interventions adapted to these places.

In the participative and place-based approach to the programming of structural funds, identifying area boundaries and territorial aggregation is a crucial aspect entrusted to local partnerships with a grassroots approach. Aggregation can occur by referring to the physical or geographical coherence of the area, the identity and vocations of the territory, common social problems in the area, the concentration of economic activities (types of agriculture, certain growing or declining sectors, etc.). However, it is associated to general guidelines at the community and national levels that vary from one cycle to another.

The quest for a suitable, effective, and strategic territorial dimension for programming is far from straightforward and problem-free in building territorial networks and partnerships. As we will see in the following chapters, it is subject to significant transformations and redefinitions of local consultation processes and regional programming. Among the policy indications provided to overcome these difficulties, a central position is occupied by the need to identify a few priorities, defined through targets and objectives related to outcomes (the changes produced in terms of benefits and well-being for citizens) and outputs (measurable product quantities) to channel the resources of the Cohesion Policy and to strengthen governance for these fundamental priorities. Another significant point is highlighted in the need to adopt greater flexibility in defining the additionality of measures financed with structural funds to better tailor programming activities to the specificities of countries and regions for local development: «An effective local governance is not created by decree, it depends on local conditions that introduce strong variability, despite the benefits brought by institutional reforms affecting local governments. Crucial are the quality of local leadership, the ability of leading classes to cooperate beyond specific interests, and to mobilize citizenship towards development

and social quality goals (...) There is a great national commitment needed for local development as a crucial component – although certainly not exclusive – of an effort for innovation and social quality» [3].

The highlighted aspects emphasize the various possible facets through which it is possible to look at the «community style of governance» [4] of regions in the programming and management of structural funds in destination contexts. The volatility of structural fund investments, which were supposed to constitute a policy change by rethinking the Southern question through a strong impulse of decentralized approaches to policies, has translated into a complex, ambivalent, and certainly not uniform and continuous process in its development path. The field investigation presented in the following text focuses precisely on how the place-based approach and the governance of local development have been articulated in the twenty-year period considered, transitioning through different phases in terms of legitimacy and consensus, from the emphasis of the 2000–2006 cycle to the moderate enthusiasm gathered in the subsequent seven-year programming periods.

## 2 The Research Context

Research focusing on the prerequisites for local development has highlighted the close connection between the economy, political institutions, administration, and social elements [5]. The superior political and institutional performance of Basilicata within the Southern context, along with its successful handling of structural fund programming, is widely documented in literature that emphasizes its greater political stability (both regionally and locally), the reduced fragmentation in the party system, and the higher bureaucratic-administrative efficiency. Despite presenting intriguing socio-economic dynamics, Basilicata faces persistent issues that still hinder its development within a Southern Italy struggling to bridge the development gap [6]. Basilicata, a small region in Southern Italy, comprises 92% agricultural and wooded areas. The territory is predominantly mountainous (46.8%), hilly (45.2%), with the remaining portion being flat (8%). The region's small size has undoubtedly favoured it compared to other Southern territories, affecting both its political-institutional and socio-economic frameworks [7]. According to the latest population census [8], as of 31/12/2021, the resident population in the region stands at 541,168 inhabitants, with a population density of 53.7 inhabitants per square kilometre, considerably lower than the national average of 195.4, placing it among Europe's lowest.

The region faces demographic challenges of aging and depopulation, surpassing the national average. Historical demographic patterns in Basilicata have witnessed substantial population migration rates, higher than other Southern regions and similar only to those recorded in Calabria. The tight relationship between demographic decline and employment issues is particularly severe in Basilicata. Despite labour market values being more positive than Southern averages, youth unemployment underpins forecasts of the region's potential depopulation. In 2018, Basilicata ranked second only to Calabria in terms of migration rate (3.8 inhabitants per thousand) [6] especially affecting the working-age population and individuals with higher educational qualifications.

Despite unique characteristics within its industrial system, the regional economic impacts of policies remain limited, especially considering the small size of the affected

territory. Basilicata hosts significant industrial activities that have been established over time, including automotive and oil extraction industries. The latter represents a unique aspect nationally, as the region holds the largest onshore hydrocarbon reserve in Western Europe, with two major oilfields in the Lucanian Apennines. The potential to use financial resources from oil royalties significantly impacts the region's autonomous budget revenues. Recent data from the Ministry of Environment and Energy Security estimates that oil and gas royalties contributed to the Basilicata Region in 2021 by multinational companies operating in the region amounted to around €129,000,000. Despite these financial resources, paradoxically, the royalties have not been systematically used in regional development strategies, resulting in a limited impact on the region's structural issues as a whole [9]. Over approximately thirty years of soil exploitation by oil companies, the impacts of such activities on the region's critical issues related to unemployment, social exclusion, and territorial inequalities have been virtually non-existent. This observation holds true not only for the overall region but also for the municipalities of the Val d'Agri. Despite being in the oil district and receiving substantial annual funding, the small municipalities of this area have witnessed intense depopulation. During the decade from 2008 to 2018, the overall demographic decrease in the area was 3,000 inhabitants (-4%), higher than the regional average (-3.1%). Poverty levels in Basilicata are much higher than the national level and very similar to the rest of Southern Italy. In 2021 the incidence of family relative poverty in Basilicata was 20,3% (compared to 11,1% in Italy and 19,2% in the South) [8].

With regard to the political-institutional context, research on Basilicata conducted by Leonardi, Putnam, Nanetti [10] identifies a «Regional Effect» underlying institutional performance, allowing Basilicata to be considered a unique case in the programming and management of community funds in the Southern panorama, consistent with the capacities expressed by the regional body since its establishment. Local elites (political, institutional, and economic) have demonstrated better regulatory abilities in supporting social change, capitalising on its benefits and mediating among challenges. The regional social regulation ability can be considered as «the specific capacity to exploit modernization opportunities and succeed in mediating between new and pre-existing interests in such a way that the change process is not disorderly, but on the contrary – despite inevitable discontinuities, delays, and conflicts – is guided by social values, criteria, and norms of reference» [7].

### **3 The European and Territorial Programming Processes During the 2000–2020 Period**

#### **3.1 The 2000–2006 Programming Cycle**

The 2000–2006 cycle of Structural Funds programming is characterized by a significant regional centrality in the formulation and implementation of development strategies within the framework of the European Union's cohesion policy. Basilicata enters this new phase of European policies with a solid experience in managing community funds. Already with the Plurifund Operational Programme (POP) during the 1994–1999 period, Basilicata had adopted an approach to Structural Funds programming based on merging

EU programs with strategies outlined in regional development plans, as well as rationalizing its administrative organization. This approach was confirmed and consolidated during the cycle 2000–2006 seven-year period. The Regional Operational Programme (ROP) benefited from both the regional development plan (RDP) for the 1998–2000 period and the reorganization of the administrative activities (Regional Laws 30/1997 and 48/2000). Through this, the Basilicata Region framed the programming of Structural Funds as a priority within its competencies and exercise of regional autonomy. The formulation of priority strategies for Structural Funds programming, in strict coherence not only with the National Strategic Framework (NSF) but also with the objectives of regional development plans, underlies the Region's efficiency of expenditure and the effective management of EU resources.

This approach led Basilicata to be identified as a “case study” among Southern regions. Testimonies from interviews underscore the crucial role of the President of the Region and the regional administration officers in the Basilicata structural fund programming during the 2000–2006 period. Based on a strong bond between political authority and the technical expertise of the administration, despite the presence of conflicts between the regional and local levels, the 2000–2006 cycle exemplifies the relevance assumed by the regional government in the Europeanisation processes of Basilicata.

Within this general framework, according to the interviewees, territorial area programming constitutes the major innovation and the most significant legacy of Structural Funds programming in the 2000–2006 cycle. In particular, Integrated Territorial Projects (ITPs) are the most relevant implementing tools of Basilicata's Regional Operational Programme during the European Structural Funds programming cycle of 2000–2006, as their introduction initiated important institutional innovations. In contrast to other negotiated programming instruments, these tools assign greater responsibilities to both the Region and municipalities for promoting and managing local development instruments [11]. In the 2000–2006 programming, ITPs are considered «instruments for enhancing territorial resources, focused on ‘crucial places’ of development and based on the integration of different interventions (infrastructural, industrial incentives, training, etc.), functional to a shared goal of territorial development. This happens within a framework of broad involvement of governments and local actors» [12].

The territorial aggregations of ITPs in Basilicata largely correspond to the Leader areas, underscoring a strategy aimed at capitalizing on existing relationships but also fostering dialogue between the private component of the partnership, primarily active in Leader areas, and the public component typical of ITP areas. This mobilizes both, allowing them to better interact and collaborate on actions aimed at the overall local development, not just rural development. Continuity is emphasized along two additional lines: supporting already adopted strategies and preserving the territorial scope of previous negotiated programming initiatives; promoting the aggregation of municipalities for joint management of essential services. In this cycle, Mountain Communities and Provinces also play a significant role in consultations and participatory processes, but the most salient feature is the strong regional centralization in decision-making processes, whereas the private sector only performs an advisory function.

The literature and the evaluation reports on ITPs agree in highlighting significant progresses in terms of the institutional capacity of local authorities, confirmed by our

research. Interviewed witnesses, both in political and technical roles, note the significant shift that the 2000–2006 programming cycle marks in the history of regional programming, both before and after. The Basilicata's better performance compared to other regions is underscored for several aspects: from defining strategies for regional development, to investing in the necessary institutional architecture for programme implementation, to fostering integrated territorial programming processes as a new way to decide and act for local development. European Structural Funds programming, subjected to a specific process chain, provided an important learning opportunity for regional programming. On the other hand, there were numerous critical issues linked to the complexity of the governance structures envisaged in the Integrated territorial projects which were not explicitly regulated within the administrative system, such as the 'Local Institutional Partnership' (LIP). These structures, assuming a central role in formulating and managing territorial projects, frequently slowed the decision-making process for local development. They even wielded a sort of veto power over decisions, especially in case of reprogramming measures and interventions.

### 3.2 The 2007–2013 Programming Cycle

In the seven-year period from 2007 to 2013, due to a mere statistical effect Basilicata, was the only region among those previously classified as "Objective 1" to enter in a *phasing-out* regime. This means it received transitional aid aimed at promoting convergence in terms of economic growth towards the objective of "Regional Competitiveness and Employment". In the seven-year period from 2007 to 2013, due to a mere statistical effect Basilicata, was the only region among those previously classified as "Objective 1" to enter in a *phasing-out* regime. This means it received transitional aid aimed at promoting convergence in terms of economic growth towards the objective of "Regional Competitiveness and Employment".

For the 2007–2013 cycle, research highlights an incomplete maturation, in some cases, even a real regression of institutional and administrative capacities, both at the central and at the territorial levels. This resulted in a lack of continuity, on both the political and the administrative fronts, in managing operational programmes and advancing integrated territorial programming interventions. The economic and financial crisis of 2008 certainly weighed on this, and consequently, the national coordination framework became fragile (diminished over the years due to necessary systemic expenditure containment processes, which didn't always differentiate between different functions).

The Regional Operational Programme (ROP) financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for 2007–2013 outlines two types of integrated tools that, by valorizing integration methods, territoriality, and partnership, introduce substantial innovation elements, primarily in an increased territorial or thematic specialization. As stated in the related PO «the integrated and territorial intervention mode that characterized regional development programmes from 2000–2006, especially in Southern regions, is (...) an example and inspiration for the current phase. This requires local development policies to flexibly adapt to different intervention scales, functional to the nature of identified problems and opportunities, even involving private partners' resources and skills» (Basilicata Region, 2008). The main instruments of territorial programming in this cycle are the Integrated Tourist Offer Projects (ITOPs). According to the Regional Tourism

Plan (2008), ITOPs «promote the formation of value chains and the consolidation of local tourism systems capable of networking various cultural, natural, and landscape ‘attractions’ in a ‘district’ perspective and structuring integrated tourism packages by enhancing specific local competitive advantages». The ITOPs contributed to a significant shift in the governance perspective by assigning a predominant role to the socio-economic partnerships and making the public actor less influential. These new tools for integrated territorial programming implemented a negotiated procedure based on the establishment of a private-public partnership (with a downsized public role compared to Integrated Territorial Projects (ITPs) and strictly functional infrastructures). In this period, there was a cultural – as well as financial – disinvestment in territorial programming that starts from the national level and obviously affects the local level. The onset of the economic crisis in 2008 and the re-centralisation measures have had important repercussions on regional programming in terms of loss of autonomy and, more than in other cycles, the use of structural funds as ordinary funds is particularly evident. In Basilicata, the crisis reduced the programming of structural funds to a patching-up of holes that blew up the structure of unitary programming and the intertwining of ordinary, additional and additional funds. Several policies that had been initiated were deactivated when it would have been more productive to support and maintain what had been created. Moreover, the 2007–2013 cycle marks a profound discontinuity in integrated territorial programming in the region. The first difference from the previous cycle relates to the thematic and sectoral focus of territorial development for Basilicata. The IOPCPs promote a local planning that is restricted to the tourism, which is one of the region’s strengths. The second difference concerns the governance structure. In the case of the PIOTs, the partnership is centred on the private component, marking a major discontinuity with the preponderant role assumed by public institutions in the PIT phase of territorial planning.

A recurring opinion among the political actors interviewed is that the weakness of integrated territorial programming is linked to the discontinuity of territorial aggregations and the adoption of new tools in each programming cycle. In the 2007–2013 programming cycle, territorial planning in Basilicata is significantly burdened by the dissolution of relevant intermediate local authorities – the Mountain communities – and the failure to confirm the previous territorial areas in order to capitalize on, and solidify, the ongoing experiences of cooperation and collaboration for local development<sup>1</sup>.

Changing the tools not only means changing pursued objectives and strategies, but also affects a system of relations and construction of local development partnerships that becomes disorganized and disjointed. Although there were several implementation and programming criticalities in the management of the ITPs, their cancellation and replacement with instruments that also transform the vertical and horizontal governance system has contributed to disperses skills, relationships and interrupts a process of shared co-construction of the territory and its development strategies. In addition, the shift of weight towards private actors in the ITOPs constitutes another significant criticality because the regional entrepreneurial system is not uniform across the regional territory;

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Law 244/07 (Financial Law 2008) for the reorganization of Mountain communities to contain public finances according to the indications of the Unified Text on Local Authorities (TUEL), the Basilicata Region, with Regional Law 33/2010 (Financial Law 2011) abolishes the 14 existing mountain communities.



not all small or very small enterprises have the same capacity to cooperate and build visions of local development, and downsizing the public component does not guarantee a better decision-making process.

### 3.3 The 2014–2020 Programming Cycle

In the 2014–2020 programming cycle, Basilicata moves back from its «phasing-out» status to that of a «less developed region», marking a unique situation in the national panorama. Consequently, the direction and aims of cohesion policies change again: from transitioning towards competitiveness to bridging the development gap.

In the 2014–2020 programming cycle, the two main axes of local development – territorial cohesion and integrated programming – converge on the issue of «internal areas», with the aim of countering depopulation, as defined in the National Strategy for Inner Areas. During this cycle, territorial cohesion becomes crucial for achieving economic and social cohesion, under strong national control<sup>2</sup>. The national presidium, experienced in the previous cycle as a limiting compression of regional autonomy, in the 2014–2020 cycle, reverses its meaning, configuring itself as a guarantee of essential rights in the areas on the margins of the region. The internal area becomes in this phase a physical and participatory space through which public institutions, both national and local, once again become central actors in the governance of local development. Identifying “Inner areas” and their inclusion in the National Strategy is crucial for a region like Basilicata, where 126 out of 131 municipalities exhibit the expected characteristics of “Inner area” concerning their distance from essential public services in health, education and transport.

Once again, territorial programming in the 2014–2020 cycle relied on a new instrument: the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI). Leveraging the integration of different types of interventions and using combinations of priority axes from one or more programmes, the aim of ITI was for greater concreteness compared to past experiences. It’s worth noting that the 2014–2020 cycle follows the cohesion policy reform (Law 125/2013), that aimed to recentralize the governance of Structural Funds for better programming and fund expenditure outcomes. This strategic shift in territorial programming was supported both at the European level through the reference regulation and at the national level through the Partnership Agreement. The goal was to concentrate resources and interventions to overcome long and complex processes of territorial programming that failed to impact reality in terms of implementation. According to Article 36 of EU Regulation 1303/2013, the Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) represents the chief implementation mode of the ESF Operational Program 2014–2020. And again, the design of this new territorial programming instrument aims to integrate priorities belonging to different strategic objectives and offer the possibility of using different funds and potentials from multiple operational programmes.

Regarding the cooperative capacity mobilized by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (NSIA), interviews with actors highlight at least two important issues. First, the

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<sup>2</sup> Inner areas are sub-regional areas with demographic and geographic problems, significantly distant from public service and marked by conditions of high social and economic disadvantage for their residents.

different objectives of the NSIA compared to other experiences in territorial programming. Among these, they stress the almost exclusive focus of tools and interventions on the balancing of citizenship rights rather than on general development objectives. Second, the leading role given to public institutions and authorities in decision-making process, especially the mayors of the small and very small municipalities affected by the territorial interventions. In this regard, the difficulties in cooperation in some inner areas compared to others were not a direct consequence of the number of municipalities included in the aggregation but rather of the actors themselves. According to one interviewee, the political turnover of mayors who are the most important protagonists have had a significant impact in the networking relation carried out in the territory. Indeed, in the place-based approach promoted by the NSIA the overcoming of the administrative boundaries of individual municipalities to look at the territory as a whole is the key to achieving integrated development objectives and revitalizing the economy and life of places. The interviewees also confirmed the emphasis on the access to social rights in the inner areas and the encouragement of extensive collaborations for managing shared services. However, they express dissatisfaction with a recurring issue seen in previous cycles: the lack of coordination with the national level and integration between funds for local development. In this programming period, for example, the absence of a synthesis between the new instrument of the Integrated Territorial Investment and the Leader Programme has affected the possibilities for action in Basilicata.

## 4 Conclusions

The territorial aggregation of municipalities has been an open issue during the 20-year planning period considered and remains a relevant theme. According to interviewees, the alternation of different approaches and tools for territorial planning was coupled with a lack of definition of optimal areas for programming. The changing geometries of territories followed criteria not always functional and effective for local development. At the national level, processes of recentralization and simplification have further influenced territorial dynamics. Recentralization shifts have occurred: from unlimited trust in autonomy exercised at the local level and a convinced optimism in the territories' ability, to strategically plan their development towards reinforced interventions guided and directed nationally. The reorganization of peripheral and intermediate local authorities in territories is crucial for enabling the sedimentation of cooperative experiences and participatory planning in local contexts. As the research shows, on a national level, the rhetoric of governance permeates the three analyzed programming cycles in various ways. But the three elements of place-based policy – planning, integration, and territorialization – rather than given traits, have remained open questions. Over the two-decade period, even the aspect of territorialization has weakened, and the place-based dimension of local development in structural funds programming has seen a reduction in the weight, relevance, and recognition of regions and local contexts, in favour of an increasingly dominant role of both the national and the regional level in defining territorial strategies.

At the local level, internal dynamics within the regional administration, regional leadership in coordinating local development, and the role of mayors emerge as central, but with a different contribution in the different programming cycles examined. The

identification of the optimal area for integrated local development planning within a territorial framework remains an unresolved issue, as it did not settle over time and changed continuously. Another weakness of the Basilicata context is the passive role of economic actors, who do not contribute to an integrated and sustainable local development vision and planning, remaining entirely detached from formulating strategies and priorities for the territory. Research highlights that integrated territorial programming needs long and medium-term reference contexts for shared scope programming; therefore, a territorial programming that goes beyond programming cycles. Constructing working partnerships that can consolidate over time, beyond the bureaucratic establishment of municipal aggregations requires effective, regulated, permanent governance structures recognized in the territory, that can ensure a stable framework for integrated planning (among actors, resources, and levels of government). Over the last twenty years, the meaning and the areas of territory has changed from one programming cycle to the next. The instruments used to intervene, far from being simple technical frameworks, involved a politically dense process, not straightforward nor without contradictions: policy instruments become institutions, create relationships, reconfigure powers even beyond intentions [13]. Different instruments mean not only different rules and procedures but, above all, also different definitions of territory, local development, different relationships, and different networks.

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