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FONDAZIONE
PER IL FUTURO
DELLE CITTÀ



European Lecture Serie *Small Towns in focus*

AESOP Small Towns TG

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Small Towns in Italy.

The National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI)
and other policies for small rural settlements

Arch. **Valeria Francioli**

University of Florence, Architecture Department - Regional Design Lab

Via P.A. Micheli 2, 50121, Florence, Italy

valeria.francioli@unifi.it

+39 366 3188455





contents

- * Why is it important to talk about small towns in Italy and why is this debate increasingly relevant?
- * How has been possible to move beyond extractive logics and promote a unified socio-economic development project for small towns?
- * An example of success
- * What have we learned and what still needs to be done?



Why is it important to talk about small towns in Italy and why is this debate increasingly relevant?

renewed attention directed toward rural areas and peripheral territories of the country, no longer viewed solely as a problem, but as an opportunity

a renewed academic and political stance that no longer recognises the efficacy of long-term approaches centered on welfare provision and indiscriminate compensatory funding





Why is it important to talk about small towns in Italy and why is this debate increasingly relevant?

the pandemic experience boosted widespread desire to escape congested urban environments and reconnect with more familiar rural and mountain settings

a radical reconsideration of the relationship between human settlements and ecosystems, questioning the anthropocentric and urban-centric development models

https://www.repubblica.it/dossier/cronaca/turismo-2021/2021/03/01/news/l_architetto_stefano_boeri_la_pandemia_ci_ha_fatto_riscoprire_i_borghi_storici_cosi_i_piccoli_comuni_salveranno_anche_le_-289447295/

L'architetto Stefano Boeri: "La pandemia ci ha fatto riscoprire i borghi storici. Così i piccoli comuni salveranno anche le metropoli"

di Alessia Gallione



Dalle terre distrutte dal terremoto agli ex comuni minerari del Sulcis. Da Gromo, nella Bergamasca, a Brugnello sul Trebbia: "Scuole all'aperto, cinema nelle piazze: con gli studenti del Politecnico di Milano stiamo provando a reinventare questi angoli di paradiso"

01 MARZO 2021 PUBBLICATO PIÙ DI UN ANNO FA

Un anno fa, nel silenzio dolente delle città svuotate e paralizzate dal primo lockdown, Stefano Boeri aveva affidato a *Repubblica* la sua visione per trasformare un aspetto della crisi in un'opportunità: "Il futuro sarà nei borghi storici". Una "previsione", dice, che non solo "va confermata", ma che sta prendendo forma in progetti e disegni e piani di recupero. Perché su quell'idea, l'architetto ha già iniziato a lavorare. Per iniziare a riportare scintille di vita in quella rete di piccoli centri - 5.800 sotto i 5 mila abitanti, di cui 2.300 in stato di abbandono, disseminati soprattutto lungo la dorsale appenninica e l'arco prealpino. Dalle terre distrutte dal terremoto agli ex comuni minerari del Sulcis, in Sardegna. Fino a Gromo, nella Bergamasca, e a Brugnello - abitanti: 10 - un gioiello



Why is it important to talk about small towns in Italy and why is this debate increasingly relevant?

TOWN project

identified “small and medium-sized towns” (SMST) using a morphological approach based on two operational thresholds: population and residential density.

SMSTs are defined as settlements with **between 5,000 and 50,000 inhabitants**, and with a density of **at least 300 inhabitants per km²**. Within the TOWN project, these criteria produced **8,414 SMSTs across Europe**

Gr. 1 – Scheme of SMSTs, HDUCs e VSTs in Europe based on population and density. Source: ESPON TOWN, 2013)

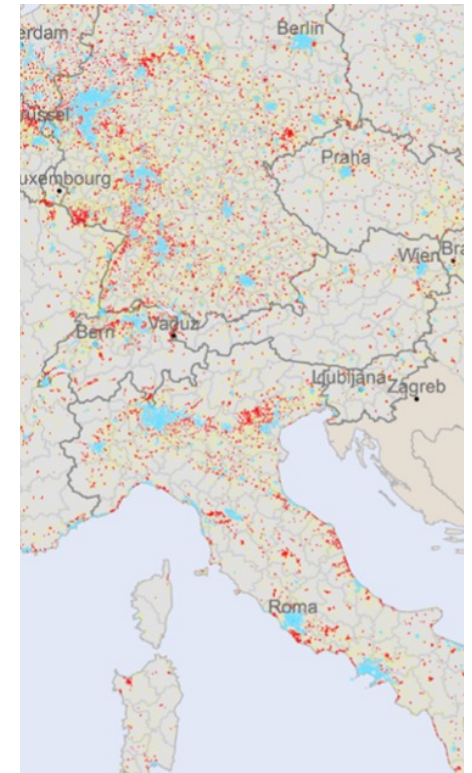
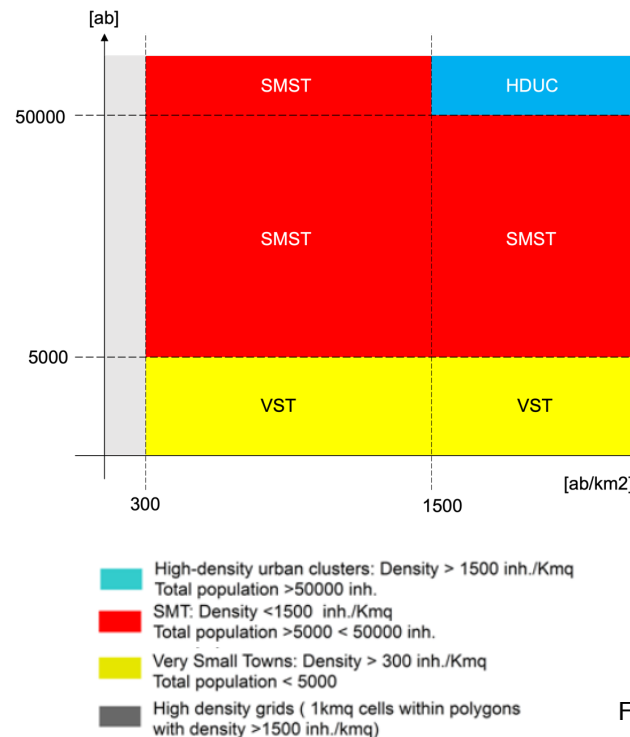


Fig. 1 – Zoom of the grid-based map of SMSTs, HDUCs e VSTs in Europe. Source: ESPON TOWN, 2013



Why is it important to talk about small towns in Italy and why is this debate increasingly relevant?

lost its historical
or defensive
connotations

borgo (hamlet)

vs

paese (town)

associated with
picturesque
imagery,
commodification,
elite tourism, and
branding

"A municipality with a total resident population of up to 5,000 inhabitants in which a clearly identifiable and recognisable historic centre is present"

MIC3 – I. 2.1 Attrattività dei borghi

"A street or cluster of houses outside the city walls" and, by extension, to "an autonomous settlement protected by natural or built fortifications"

Tommaseo-Bellini etymological dictionary

a product of the
contemporary
"borgomania,"

aesthetic-touristic ideal

heritage-driven valorisation and gentrification

"Inhabited centre of limited dimensions"

Treccani Italian dictionary

generic meaning
of an inhabited
territory

"Rather large territory which presents homogeneity in a certain respect"

Italian dictionary De Mauro

a basis for service
provision, governance, and
local development policies

"A portion of land, not small, inhabited or inhabitable, in which people can live"

Tommaseo-Bellini etymological dictionary

* aesthetic instrumentalisation
hinders genuine regeneration



How has been possible to move beyond extractive logics and promote a unified socio-economic development project for small towns?

Jacini inquiry (S. Jacini, 1877-1886)

Sicily in 1876 (L. Franchetti, S. Sonnino, 1877)

Treaty of Rome (1957)

Common Agricultural Policy (1962)

*Cohesion Policy Reform
1° and 2° Programming Cycles (1988 - 1999)*

NextGenerationEU (2022)

European Social Fund Plus - ESF+ (2021)

European Social Fund - ESF (1975)

European Regional Development Fund (1975)

*Agrarian reform
and the Mezzogiorno Cash
(1950)*

**National Strategy
for Inner Areas - SNAI**
*Strategia Nazionale
per le Aree Interne
Programming Cycle 2014-2020*

Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe - REACT-EU (2021-2027)

Just Transition Fund - JTF (2021-2027)

European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development - EAFRD (2021-2027)

✱ How has been possible to move beyond extractive logics and promote a unified socio-economic development project for small towns?

In 2014, with the signing of the Partnership Agreement with the European Commission, SNAI was officially launched

Built upon clear objectives:

- > Strengthening citizenship rights by ensuring adequate access to essential services – education, healthcare, and mobility – even in remote areas;
- > Countering depopulation by creating attractive living conditions;
- > Promoting local development based on territorial specificities and local production chains;
- > Building multi-level governance involving the State, Regions, Municipalities, and local actors

<https://politichecoesione.governo.it/it/politica-di-coesione/strategie-tematiche-e-territoriali/strategie-territoriali/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne-snai/>



How has been possible to move beyond extractive logics and promote a unified socio-economic development project for small towns?

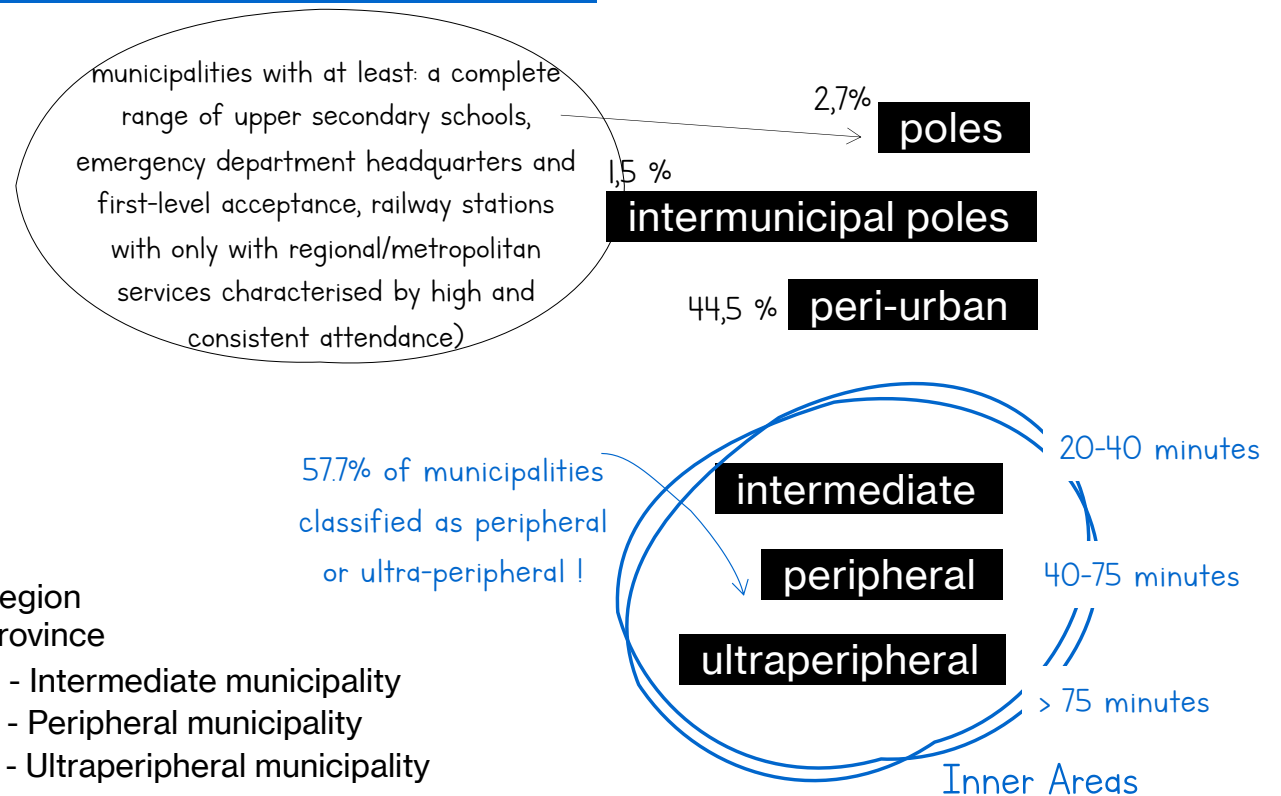
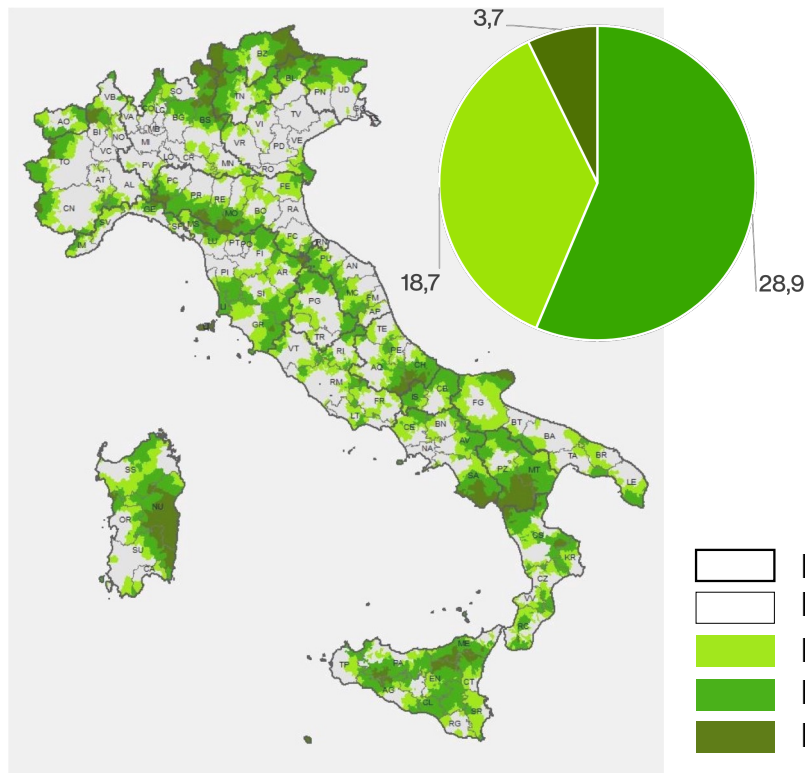


Fig. 2 – Classification of Italian Municipalities in Inner Areas (ISTAT, 2020)

Fig. 3 – Levels of peripherality of Municipalities in Inner Areas (ISTAT, 2020)

Gr. 2 - Percentage of Municipalities in Inland Areas and minutes to reach essential services (ISTAT, 2020)



How has been possible to move beyond extractive logics and promote a unified socio-economic development project for small towns?

<https://politichecoesione.governo.it/it/politica-di-coesione/strategie-tematiche-e-territoriali/strategie-territoriali/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne-snai/le-aree-interne-2014-2020/>

2012

Map of Inner Areas

classifying municipalities based on travel times to essential services
Department for Development Policy Istat*, Bank of Italy, academics and experts

2013-2014

Partnership Agreement 14-20

formally integrated SNAI into Italy's strategic policy framework, and the first territorial candidacies were submitted

National government, the Inner Areas Technical Committee, the Regions, the Municipalities and the European Commission

Through a structured "Assessment Report," each area was selected and delineated, with the appointment of a lead mayor (one from each selected areas) and a technical coordinator.

2015

Selection of project areas

The Technical Committee conducted statistical analyses, field missions, and assessments
Regions, Municipalities and local leaders

2016-2017

Selection of 72 project areas

involving 1,077 municipalities and over 2 million residents. These areas were marked by demographic decline, with 57.7% of municipalities classified as "peripheral" or "ultra-peripheral."



How has been possible to move beyond extractive logics and promote a unified socio-economic development project for small towns?

1st step

Strategy Outline

a document identifying the guiding vision using a set of 80 indicators assessing needs and priorities built by the municipalities of the area together with the Region, the Technical Committee and the relevant actors of the territory

Strategic Preliminary Document

defined the primary change trajectories and initial expected outcomes developed by the mayors with the Region, the Technical Committee and local stakeholders

Area Strategy

detailing interventions, expected results, indicators, resources, and the overall action logic jointly drafted by the Technical Committee, the Region, the relevant mayor, and local stakeholders

Co-design processes

undertaken through stakeholder mapping and thematic focus groups to shape specific development projects involves Technical Committee, Municipalities, Region, citizens, businesses, schools and associations.

Framework Programme Agreement

defining responsibilities, timelines, resources, and monitoring systems between the Territorial Cohesion Agency, the Region, the lead mayor, and the relevant Ministries

<https://politichecoesione.governo.it/it/politica-di-coesione/strategie-tematiche-e-territoriali/strategie-territoriali/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne-snai/le-aree-interne-2021-2027/openkit-delle-aree-progetto/>



How has been possible to move beyond extractive logics and promote a unified socio-economic development project for small towns?

Pros

- ⊗ one of the most **significant innovations** in Italian territorial cohesion policy
- ⊗ **integration of investments** in essential services with local development measures
- ⊗ adoption of a **place-based approach** built on local knowledge, data, and actors' involvement

Cons

- ⊗ administrative machine's **complexity**
- ⊗ **excessive number** of selected areas (72 instead of the originally planned 40)
- ⊗ challenges in **fund integration** and alignment with the CAP
- ⊗ **inconsistent engagement** of communities



How has been possible to move beyond extractive logics and promote a unified socio-economic development project for small towns?

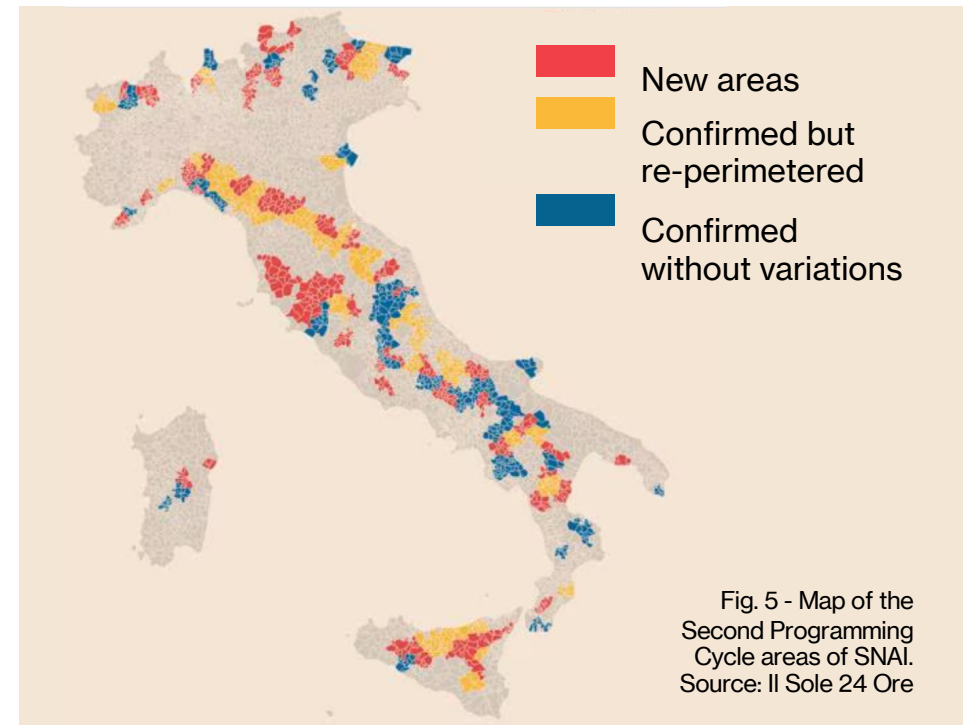
Second programming cycle
is underway with the
2021–2027 Partnership Agreement

124 areas have been identified: **56** are
newly selected areas, the rest are either
confirmed or re-perimetered

1,904 municipalities

4,570,731 residents

A “**Special Project for Minor Islands**” has
also been introduced, involving **35**
municipalities with a population of around
213,000.



<https://politichecoesione.governo.it/it/politica-di-coesione/strategie-tematiche-e-territoriali/strategie-territoriali/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne-snai/le-aree-interne-2021-2027/>

<https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/la-nuova-mappa-aree-interne-dote-2-miliardi-1904-comuni-AEg9cBDD>



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European Social Fund
Plus - ESF+ (2021)

**“Attractiveness of
Historic Borghi” Call**

Bando “Attrattività dei borghi
storici” by Italian Ministry of
Culture (MiC)

Mission 1 – Digitalisation,
Innovation, Competitiveness and
Culture, Component 3: Culture
4.0, Investment 2.1.

European Social Fund - ESF (1975)

European Regional Development
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European Agricultural Fund for Rural
Development - EAFRD (2021-2027)



How has been possible to move beyond extractive logics and promote a unified socio-economic development project for small towns?

Three funding lines:

- > **Line A** targets 21 “pilot *borghi*,” with €420 million in total. Each region selected one project, funded with roughly €20 million.
- > **Line B** is the most substantial, with €380 million for municipalities under 5,000 inhabitants. It provides up to €1.6 million per municipality. A total of 1,791 proposals were submitted, involving 2,164 municipalities – 40% of Italy’s small towns. Yet only 207 projects were funded.
- > **Line C**, with €200 million, supports micro, small, and medium enterprises – both profit and non-profit – reinforcing initiatives financed under Lines A and B



How has been possible to move beyond extractive logics and promote a unified socio-economic development project for small towns?

Pros

- ⊗ widespread participation
- ⊗ engaging capacity of local actors
- ⊗ some regions stood out for strong administrative capability
- ⊗ territorial coverage was extensive, avoiding concentration in specific provinces

Cons

- ⊗ line A was perceived as a “national lottery
- ⊗ weak coordination with SNAI
- ⊗ concerns over transparency of the procedures
- ⊗ tight deadlines that penalised municipalities with limited staffing or financial resources
- ⊗ cultural ambiguity surrounding the concept of borgo remains

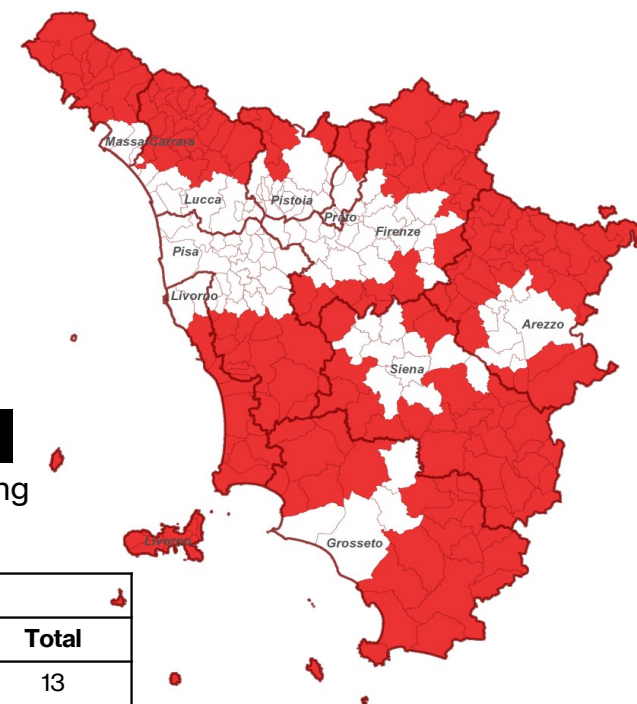


An example of success

The **L.R. 11/2025** included in the definition of «Widespread Tuscany» municipalities that are:

- Totally mountains** (annex B, L.R. 68/2011 "Rules on the system of local self-government»)
- Classified in the map of Inland Areas as **"intermediate", "peripheral", "outermost"** (update of the Map of Inland Areas 2020 for the 2021-2027 Programming Cycle of the Department for Cohesion Policies and for the South)

Tuscany Municipalities					
	Area Type	A Totally Mountain	B Partially Mountain	C Not Mountain	Total
Poles and Belt Areas	A Pole		5	8	13
	B Intermunicipal Pole		2	2	4
	C Belt Area	8	15	69	92
Inland Areas	D Intermediate	27	11	29	67
	E Peripheral	57	8	15	80
	F Outermost	16		1	17
	Total	108	41	124	273



A total of 172 municipalities in the «Widespread Tuscany»

Fig. 6 – The municipalities of the “Widespread Tuscany”. Source: Tuscany Region

Tab. 1 - The municipalities of the “Widespread Tuscany”, elaboration by the author. Source: Tuscany Region.

<https://www.regione.toscana.it/toskana-diffusa/i-comuni>



An example of success

Regeneration project “*Montagna Fiorentina*”

Londa and San Godenzo, Florence

- 2019** *Mayors ask themselves: “Who do we want to be in 15–20 years?”*
- 2020** *“Book of Dreams” with the hopes and strategic visions of the mayors*
- 2021** Roadmap through active participation of citizens, businesses, and associations
- 2022** Winning of Line B of *Bando Borghi* and start of the project “*Florentine Mountain*”



Fig. 7 – Mountain areas among the Florence province
<https://montagnafiorentina.com/scopri-il-progetto-di-rigenerazione/>



An example of success

Regeneration project “*Montagna Fiorentina*”

Londa and San Godenzo, Florence

12 interventions



> Adaptive reuse and functional adaptation of the **Chalet del Lago** in Londa

<https://bottega17.com/progetto/nuovo-chalet-del-lago/>



> Functional and structural adaptation for a cultural and exhibition centre in the **Palazzo Del Campana** in San Godenzo

<https://montagnafiorentina.com/londa-e-san-godenzo/>



An example of success

Regeneration project “*Montagna Fiorentina*”

Londa and San Godenzo, Florence

12 interventions



> Continuous cultural programming and the **Florentine Mountain Festival**



> Residences for artists and social innovators - the «*A Dimora*» project



> Establishment of a **Local Living Lab**

<https://montagnafiorentina.com/festival/>
<https://montagnafiorentina.com/montagna-fiorentina/residenza-d-artista/>
<https://montagnafiorentina.com/montagna-fiorentina/local-living-lab/>



An example of success

Regeneration project “*Montagna Fiorentina*”

Londa and San Godenzo, Florence

12 interventions

- > Construction of [visiting itineraries](#) to enhance intangible heritage and local production
- > Building [collaborations and partnerships](#) for co-design and management of goods and services
- > [Mapping](#) of disused spaces and [co-design](#) for their residential and hospitality reuse
- > Creation of a [territorial marketing web platform](#)
- > Integrated [branding communication strategy](#)



What have we learned and what still needs to be done?

- The experiences of SNAI and Bando Borghi show that Italy has begun to overcome the traditional extractive logic governing inner areas and small towns
- It is essential to deepen the debate on *borghi* and *paesi*, recognising their features and confronting the dominant approaches of contemporary strategic planning to small towns in the country
- Limitations demonstrate that funding alone cannot ensure substantial impacts without design capacity, long-term vision, and genuine community engagement
- The key challenge for culture-led projects in Italy is not avoiding tourism per se but ensuring it does not become the only possible development paradigm
- Italy currently lacks a comprehensive monitoring system to capture results, challenges, and replicable models emerging from SNAI and the Bando Borghi
- The decisive role of the mayors and active communities as “regenerators” in innovating the ordinary without pretending that it must always be extraordinary



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Thank you for your **attention!**

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