
Local Development strategies for inner and fragile areas: insights from the **Milk Mountain** strategy for the Emilian Apennines

Inner Areas are considered strategically relevant to foster a more sustainable and cohesive development within countries. The ***Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI)*** intends to innovate local services and development investments within a multi-level framework, involving local communities through a participatory approach to local development. In particular, the SNAI assigns full leadership to **Unions / Associations of local governments** at the municipal level to adopt an **integrated programming method of local development strategies at territorial level**. These strategies should focus both on local economic development (i.e. land management and forests; local food products; renewable energy; natural and cultural heritage; and traditional crafts and SMEs) and essential services for citizens (i.e. primary and secondary school and vocational training, local mobility and transports, healthcare and medical services), in order to reinforce the connection between development and services towards equality of opportunities and shared prosperity.

In this regard, potential insights can be drawn from the experience of the **“Milk Mountain” Strategy for the Emilian Apennines** in Emilia-Romagna Region (Italy), which was elaborated within the SNAI. This initiative is exemplary of a model of designing and implementing a local development strategy for an inner and fragile area by leveraging on the valorisation of typical products with high value-added and by integrating it with the upgrading and renewal of public services for citizens and communities.



The Experience

The local development strategy **“The Milk Mountain: healthy lifestyles and enterprising communities in the Emilian Apennines”** was approved after a two-year design process triggered by the convergence of some relevant factors: strong political leadership, close relations among key players, active presence of a technical support local organizations (*Consorzio Stabile CAIRE*) and the selection as the first pilot “project area” in the Region.

Although Emilia-Romagna is considered among the most advanced Italian regions, the mountainous territory of the Emilian Apennines is marked by an extremely fragmented articulation of settlements; a dense network of small towns and villages that are still inhabited and have a community identity, but which are increasingly struggling to support the basic network of local services, starting with commercial and public services. The reference area for the strategy is located in the Province of Reggio Emilia and includes seven municipalities, that cover an area of 795.6 square kilometres with a population of just under 34.000 inhabitants.

The strategy was centred on the **valorisation of the local typical product** deploying the highest value-added and multiplier effects on the local community: the Mountain Parmigiano Reggiano. Around this core asset, 19 projects foreseen within the strategy are designed to bring about substantial changes in the area with regard to: the valorisation of typical local value chains; the development of sustainable tourism; the renewal of public and social services; the activation and enhancement of community initiatives.

The strategy actively involved different type of actors ranging from the private sector, the public sector and third sector. The active involvement of cooperative dairies and of Community Co-operatives since the initial phase is a key point of the strategy.

The integrated nature of sustainable development is intrinsically part of SNAI. The “Milk Mountain” strategy for the Emilian Apennines aims to promote inclusive and sustainable local development and contribute to the localization of Agenda 2030 pursuing and catalysing the following Sustainable Development Goals:



ROADMAP

Organizations interested in this model can rely on the following insights and recommendations concerning key phases, actors, resources and actions.

PHASE 0. TRIGGERING FACTORS

The “Milk Mountain” strategy for the Emilian Apennines stems from the need to counteract the phenomena of depopulation and abandonment of mountain municipalities by their citizens. The price crisis of Parmigiano Reggiano, being the typical local product, represented the main triggering factor pushing local actors to set a new shared vision and local development strategy for their own community. Moreover, the Italian Strategy for Inner Areas was perceived by the territory as an opportunity to revitalize the area.

PHASE 1. PLANNING OF THE DESIGN PROCESS FOR THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

- Identify and engage actors belonging from different sectors and fields of expertise which share a common vision of sustainable local development and which might have potential to collaborate.
- Ensure that all necessary expertise is available for the design phase of the Strategy by contacting technical experts at local and national level.
- Involve all interested local institutions in the design phase, identifying the appropriate target area.
- Establish the basic principles of territorial planning, starting with the identification of the pivotal asset around which the development strategy should be based.
- Share the guiding ideas related to both essential services and local economic development with authorities at regional and national level.

PHASE 2. DRAFTING AND APPROVAL OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

- Create a cohesive group of local authorities sharing a common territorial perspective that goes beyond peculiar municipal interests.
- Set-up an effective and inclusive participatory process for citizens, community actors and social groups.
- If various topics are addressed, identify appropriate working groups and all relevant local actors who might be interested in being involved, providing moments of plenary discussion to discuss the thematic proposals.
- Identify financial resources and specific technical expertise that might be needed.
- Break down the previously established guiding ideas of the strategy in action sheets and specific actions, expected results and result indicators.
- Make all responsible authorities approving and signing the strategy.
- Present and share the strategy with local and national actors, who can contribute by providing resources or facilitating practices.

PHASE 3. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

- Provide institutional bodies with technical/administrative resources to follow up the strategy implementation.
- Assign responsibilities for the implementation of the projects to key actors involved

in the process that have proven to be collaborative and have appropriate resources and skills.

- Find local, national or international funds for each line of action chosen.
- Ensure synergies among thematic areas are exploited during the implementation of each project.
- Establish an implementation order that leads to widespread immediate effects and involve stakeholders in order to keep them actively committed in the strategy.
- Prepare a contingency plan in case obstacles affect the start and implementation of planned activities.

SUSTAINABILITY

- Carry out continuous scouting for resources, seeking collaboration and support from other initiatives.
- Provide for a monitoring and evaluation system to redirect ongoing activities and measure achieved results.
- Provide the public administrations involved with the technical-administrative structure necessary to carry out the strategy over time.
- Publicise and communicate the results obtained.

KEY DETERMINANTS FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION AND REPLICABILITY

<i>Actors and institutions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local communities prone to be protagonists in the process of design and implementation of the strategy.
<i>Social capital</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong political will by local governments involved, and ability to involve higher institutional levels, starting from the regional government. • Sense of territorial belonging by small Municipalities and importance of joining forces and acting together as association of municipality in order to undertake joint action and trigger territorial development processes.
<i>Human capital</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-depth technical expertise provided by local and national experts. • Administrative capacities within municipalities and their associations to make the strategy operational.
<i>Governance framework</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political leadership assigned to local municipalities. • Setting of thematic working groups to identify issues and project ideas on agri-food, health, mobility, sustainable tourism, education. • Official approval of the strategy
<i>Institutional and legal framework</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement of the most appropriate institutional bodies (for instance, association of municipalities, local health authorities) with jurisdiction over the issues affected by the strategy.
<i>Economic resources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counting on appropriate financial resources and technical support once the final strategy is approved by all institutional actors.

Value-added as a driver for sustainable human development and SDG localization

The design and implementation of local development strategies for inner and fragile areas can represent a fundamental driving force for sustainable human development and SDG localization. Indeed, its main contribution is removing citizens' obstacles to live the life they value (substantial freedom) in their own communities in terms of both social and economic opportunities.

To make this approach operational, leadership, responsibilities and accountability for both strategic programming and implementation is fully assigned to local municipalities and their associations, which are pushed to implement appropriate and permanent forms of joint management of services that are instrumental to achieving long-term results. It is also fundamental to remark that the design process does not start from projects, but rather from local citizens and communities themselves, in a truly place-based and people-centred perspective to SDG localization. Participatory process represents a fundamental asset to favour cohesion and inclusiveness within the local society, supporting the local community in enhancing social and transformative resilience towards sustainable development.

The experience of the "Milk Mountain" strategy for the Emilian Apennines, and of the Italian National Strategy for Inner Area as a whole, shows great potential for implementation in other contexts. The issues

addressed by strategy, primarily the lack of services and the depopulation of rural internal areas, are common in many emerging countries. Similarly, the intertwined attention to both local economic development processes and local service innovation is fundamental for SDG localization around the world. The joint leadership by small municipalities, the pivotal focus on typical products and local value chains, and the role played by community actors make it an even more interesting case in terms of replicability.

Building cohesion and social capital and improving governance capacities are key determinants to pursue a similar strategic planning approach. In particular, local communities and their authorities should be prone to be active protagonists in the process of design and implementation of the strategy. Alignment with other governance level is also fundamental to ensure the convergence between bottom-up and top-down processes and resources towards the same vision for sustainable human development at the local level. Nevertheless, in line with a place-based perspective, the process can be pursued by prioritising and sequencing different steps and actions and by acting on different levers in different places, or in different times for the same place, according its contextual and conjunctural conditions, the presence of key determinants and collective political willingness.

Policy Guideline elaborated by ARCO (Action Research for CO-development)
Full version available [here](#).



Setting up a Community Foundation for a sustainable local development:
Insights from the Messina Community Foundation in Italy

Local Action Group as a public-private partnership for rural development:
Insights from the Local Action Group Maiella Verde in Italy

Setting up a Work Integration Social Enterprise:
Insights from QUID Social Enterprise in Italy

Setting up a Consortium of Social Cooperatives:
Insights from the Consortium Sale della Terra in Italy

Institutional support to community regeneration:
Insights from the SIBaTer project in Italy

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