



ISMERI EUROPA

# Servizio di valutazione unitaria dei programmi co-finanziati con Fondi dell'Unione Europea nel periodo di programmazione 2014-2020

VII Rapporto tematico di valutazione – Aree Interne

Executive Summary - English

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## The objectives

The National Strategy for "Inner Areas" - SNAI represented an integrated and innovative approach to the development of territories penalized by significant geographical and demographic handicaps. The Strategy is based on the interaction of the effects produced by the various interventions falling within the specific "target" territorial area, i.e. local development projects (aimed at supporting local socio-economic systems and financed by the ERDF and ESF ROPs and the RDP) and actions for the adaptation of the supply of essential services financed with national resources from the 2014 Stability Law.

The Friuli Venezia Giulia Region has identified three Inner Areas (Alta Carnia, Dolomiti Friulane and Canal del Ferro-Val Canale). For each of these, the local authorities involved, gathered in an associative form, then defined a specific development Strategy, to be pursued through the national and regional resources made available

The Region has reserved a share of ESI Funds from the 2014-20 programming for the Strategy of each Inner Area:

- the ERDF OP contributed mainly to the Strategies through dedicated calls for Action 2.3 "Aid for investments in machinery, equipment and intangible assets, and support for corporate reorganization and restructuring processes," in order to promote investments in the local production system and accompany the technological and digital upgrading processes of companies. In addition to these initiatives, the Programme has envisaged dedicated interventions under Axis III "Supporting the transition towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors" (Action 3.1), aimed at increasing the energy efficiency of buildings schools;
- the ESF OP contributed to the implementation of policies for the Inner Areas, intervening in favour of the development of local social and professional capital, through funding reserves on the calls promoted under Axis I "Employment" (Actions 8.5.1 "Active labor policy measures" and 8.5.3 "Pathways to support business creation and self-employment") and Axis 3 "Education and Training" (Specific Objective 10.4 "Increasing the skills of the workforce and support to mobility and job placement/re-entry");
- the EAFDR RDP contributed to the territorial development objectives of the IA Strategies through Measure 19 "Support for LEADER local development."

## Evaluation questions

In light of the progress of the interventions co-financed by the 2014-2020 ESI Funds (and the Stability Law), which allowed only a partial analysis of their impacts on the territories, the Report focused on the analysis of the effectiveness/efficiency, coherence, relevance and added value of the IA Strategies, with a purely qualitative approach. The ultimate aim of the analyses is to provide recommendations for improving the regional support to Inner Areas in the context of the 2021-27 EU programming. The objectives of the analyses carried out for each criterion are presented below, which are in turn declined down into specific evaluation questions within the Report (see section 2.1).

**Effectiveness/efficiency** - to ascertain whether and to what extent interventions have achieved their intended objectives and to identify the factors that have determined or hindered their progress and success.

**Relevance** - to analyse whether the interventions made it possible to respond to the needs and problems of the territories, also in relation to

the unexpected effects of the economic crises of recent years (Covid-19 and Russia/Ukraine conflict).

**Coherence** – to analyse whether the interventions of the three Strategies are in synergy and in line with the development objectives considered (internal coherence) and whether they are complementary to other policy initiatives managed at the national level (SNAI).

**Added value** – to investigate to what extent and how the changes observed in the territories are due to the IA Strategies, or if whether would have occurred spontaneously or thanks to other regional/national policy interventions.

## Evaluation approach

At the methodological level, desk analyses of key programmatic documents, literature, monitoring data and other secondary sources were carried out. As part of these activities, a mapping of the projects funded by the ERDF, ESF and EAFRD was carried out in order to analyse the capacity of the regional Inner Areas to attract resources even outside the initiatives specifically dedicated to them. This made it possible to highlight the indirect contributions of the ESI Funds to the SNAI.

The desk analyses were integrated with semi-structured interviews with the lead municipalities and regional representatives of the ESIF interventions. An online survey was also carried out among the stakeholders involved in the SNAI definition at local level (municipalities, mountain communities, LAGs, other public bodies, social economic partnership, etc.). Finally, given the low participation in the survey, a focus group was organised in order to share and qualify the evaluation findings.

## Main findings

The main evidences that emerged, in relation to the evaluation criteria considered, are presented below.

**Effectiveness/efficiency** – The SNAI has established an innovative approach to local development based on multi-fund synergy and the active participation of local communities. The interventions selected in the IA Strategies certainly go in the direction of improving the well-being and quality of life of residents (i.e., social and health assistance, preschool support, etc.). However, the difficulties and the delays in the implementation of the projects have not allowed them to generate effects on the territory to date. For the ERDF, the contribution of Action 3.1, i.e., projects aimed at energy efficiency in school buildings and social and healthcare facilities (only one project in Alta Carnia) was much lower than expected. This type of intervention, however, is relevant for the Inner Areas, as demonstrated by the planning expressed by local authorities on the non-SNAI calls of the 2014-2020 ERDF ROP.

In terms of improvement of training provision, the effects of the SNAI are not particularly performing to date, partly due to the poor follow-up of initiatives supported for this purpose by the ESF, which are not always consistent with the area. Employment has shown good trends, although it is difficult to attribute these dynamics to SNAI. However, both the EAFRD (e.g., community cooperatives) and the ESF (e.g., specific skills training) have provided initiatives to improve employment levels, especially among youth. In Canal del Ferro - Val Canale, moreover, the Strategy focused on the creation of services, which could generate future employment effects.

The use, enhancement and restoration of the natural capital of the Inner Areas is a theme that by its nature has seen the main funding coming from the EAFRD. This fund, in fact, has provided for interventions in favour of sustainable forest use and landscape rehabilitation in each Inner Area. The delay in LEADER implementation, however, does not

allow a clear quantification of results and impacts. Beyond the SNAI, the EAFRD has nevertheless contributed to this objective through other actions of the RDP, and in particular with the measures pertaining to Priority 4 "Preserve, restore and enhance ecosystems related to agriculture and forestry" (18.9 million euros of contributions for projects falling within the regional IAs).

The phenomenon of depopulation in the Inner Areas is showing constant negative trends and the resources allocated to the SNAI are not sufficient to be able to slow or stop it. Despite this, the initiatives and services implemented under the Strategies and aimed at promoting the attractiveness of the areas have been diverse and directed at multiple targets (e.g., pre-accommodation, summer centres, community cooperatives). These initiatives were rated very positively by the stakeholders interviewed.

The SNAI has fostered the creation of more structured operational networks on the area (e.g., tourism sector and agricultural sector), despite the fragmentation of interventions. This outcome is considered crucial to the success of the Strategy. In particular, it highlights the role and value of the LAG as a development agent capable, in some Inner Areas, of generating a leverage effect for new systems of cooperation between actors in the territory.

From the point of view of effectiveness/efficiency of governance models, coordination by the different MAs needs to be strengthened, generating real accountability of them on SNAI implementation. The centralization under the Lead Municipality of several functions (in the face of scarce human resources availability) was also highlighted as a crucial factor. The role of the Mountain Service Regional Office was seen as positive (including in terms of managing calls), especially in relation to the Strategies component supported by the Stability Law. The EAFRD component seems to have benefited from the operational structures close to the territories and already broken in over time (i.e., LAGs).

If in general governance appeared to the stakeholders interviewed to be laborious and dependent on the historicity of the relationships between the various territorial actors, the process initiated with the SNAI has stimulated the creation of systems that are more functional for the implementation of interventions (e.g., Carnia 2030). After all, even in other regional contexts (e.g., Emilia Romagna) it is stressed that strengthening administrative capacity is fundamental both in the initial phase and in the management stage of the SNAI, especially in the case of small or very small administrations. Hence, the need to strengthen administrative capacity through accompanying pathways. The importance of simplifying and preparing standard models of implementation also seems evident in order to provide for burdens more proportional to the real capacity of territorial actors. Lastly, variants to the Strategy (also as result of implementation delays) are identified as excessively penalizing procedures. Delays in implementation, however, seem to have generated substantial alienation from the Strategy on the part of territories. It is also reported that because of the tight timelines many interventions appear to be uninnovative and/or unambitious.

Regarding effectiveness, in general to date it is not possible to fully observe the effects generated by SNAI due to the limited state of implementation of several interventions. However, it has often been pointed out that because of the innovative approach proposed by SNAI and despite some cultural resistance, the policy has promoted the creation of new actor networks as well as the formalization of existing unstructured networks.

In any case, it is useful to recall the fundamental importance of communicating the SNAI and its achievements in promoting the cultural

growth of territories that can also generate a driving effect also regard the next SNAI 2021-2027.

**Coherence** - The different sources of funding in the territory have not operated in an entirely synergistic manner (e.g., timing of calls for proposals). In this sense, greater coordination is welcome to increase the scalarity of funding measures, including through integration between different projects. Integrating multiple funding instruments would ensure the full multidimensionality of interventions, where supported by appropriate selection procedures to promote innovation, spread knowledge and enhance the local dimension of them. Such an improvement in the integration process could also be useful in reducing the risk arising from an oversupply of funding in the face of a scarcity of local actors. In this sense, although coherence at the design stage has been appreciable, implementation has been complicated, partly because of the lack of a real common strategy of the three funds.

**Relevance** – the SNAI has ensured, through its participatory path, not only the identification of current issues for the territories, but also the emergence of new needs in the course of its implementation. Again, the activities of constant animation of territorial actors appear decisive in order to periodically update the analysis of needs and align interventions/instruments with them.

Adjustments to the Strategy since the signing of the FPA have, however, been limited. Originally the SNAI was fully responsive to the needs of the territories partly because of the intensive collection and analysis work carried out in the initial stages. More flexibility is needed, however, in order to provide adequate responses to the territories according to possible changes in the context. The local actors interviewed expressed doubts about the ability of SNAI to adapt to the socio-economic effects of recent socio-economic crises (following Covid-19 and the Russia-Ukraine conflict) due to the complexity of the procedures for changing strategies.

**Added value** – The SNAI has generated in the area the beginning of a virtuous process of bottom-up planning that has seen the involvement of various public and private actors, but which needs to be better adapted to local capacity as well as in timing and operational methods. In this sense, the evidence gathered through the field work returned a positive evaluation by the interviewed stakeholders (especially the Lead Municipalities of the three Areas). The SNAI has responded to some issues that were previously not sufficiently addressed (e.g., services). Finally, regarding the added value generated by the SNAI, interviewees indicated that without the strategy's contribution such relevant interventions, though not always innovative, would not have been realized. The added value of the SNAI can be further strengthened in case coordination between the Funds and the administrative capacity of the territory increases.

## Recommendations

In sum, therefore, it can be observed how a process of territorial development (and in any case the activation of development dynamics) has taken place that is also linked to the spillovers of interventions that are not necessarily linked to the SNAI (i.e., other interventions of the Regional Programs, UWB - ultra-wide band - project). Such a process does not seem to be able to disregard a coordination activity among the Authorities that manage the different sources of funding and constant support (i.e., Technical Assistance) aimed at ensuring a more enlarged and effective participatory process capable of fostering the involvement of actors in all SNAI strategy's stages.

The main recommendations are presented below:

- Identify the boundary of the Inner Areas by including hub municipalities, but providing for different rules of participation in

area projects due to parameters/indicators (e.g., population, GDP, environmental parameters etc.) in order to ensure equitable spillovers to the area;

- Use simplified planning tools for variations of a technical nature and minor financial impact that may come up over the period of implementation of interventions;
- Streamline regional governance, strengthening the role and staff of the Mountain Service Department, and provide for a regional Steering Group of Inner Areas aimed at ensuring greater synergy among the various regional policies and more timely monitoring of results;
- Make greater use of the LAG's role as an agent of territorial development in order to promote greater joint use of the Funds, the submission of more innovative proposals, and the recognition of the Inner Areas Strategy among local stakeholders;
- Provide for accompanying measures to local bodies (including training measures), systematic use of administrative capacitation tools, and the creation of a core of soft skills preparatory to facilitating the efficiency of (especially) local governance pathways;
- Identify ad hoc tools for the development of marginal areas, encouraging associationism between municipalities and public-private partnerships;
- Institutionalize a self-assessment process for Inner Areas (along the lines of what is being undertaken for LAGs) in order to foster ownership of the Strategy and the planning capacity of the territories;
- Strengthen communication of the SNAI and the effects of the interventions it funds in order to increase its visibility, as well as the awareness of actors and citizens with respect to the strategy.