

A Stakeholder Analysis to Support Resilient Strategies in the Alta Valsesia Inner Area

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Abstract. In Italy, a growing attention has been paid for inner areas, which represent fragile socio-economic contexts characterized by a growing marginalization and progressive depopulation. In this paper a particular attention is focused on the necessity of identifying the role of different stakeholders in defining resilient strategies and measures to support the development and reactivation of these inner territories. This article proposes a stakeholder analysis and mapping developed in the context of the "B4R-Branding4Resilience" research project, in Alta Valsesia, which is a fragile territory that has recently become a part of an inner area according to the SNAI classification. The aim of this paper is to propose a stakeholder analysis and mapping to identify the key players with an active role in the enhancement of inner territories. In particular, a quantitative approach is applied to assess the potential role of each stakeholder and improve the power-interest matrix. Results show the presence of a large number of key stakeholders that change their position in relation to eight different challenges and to their related level of power and interest. This research on the one hand highlights the importance of the identification of key stakeholders in the definition of reactivation and enhancement strategies and on the other suggest the use of the stakeholder analysis as a tool to avoid conflicts during strategic processes.

Keywords: stakeholder analysis · inner areas · territorial enhancement · resilience · B4R research project

1 Introduction

In the last decades, the uncontrolled growth of large urban hubs has accelerated the impoverishment and depopulation of rural centers, despite their enormous natural and human capital [1]. In Italy, a growing attention has been paid in recent years to inner areas, which represent fragile socio-economic contexts to be reactivated by means of funding addressed to strategic policies and projects. The Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) was developed and implemented to counteract this weakening process and to support public administrations and local governments in defining concrete actions and

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strategies. With this aim it is important to study these particular contexts by means of data-driven analyses and experts involvement able to contrast treats and highlight strengths and opportunities [2–6].

In this paper particular attention is focused on the necessity of identifying the key actors to be involved to support resilient measures development in territories characterized by a growing marginalization and progressive depopulation. In this framework the stakeholder analysis represents an essential operational tool to identify and map the stakeholders as people able to influence the enhancement processes and to generate positive or negative impacts on the considered territory [7].

With these premises, this article proposes a stakeholder analysis and mapping to identify the key players with an active role in the enhancement of inner territories. In particular, assuming the well-known power-interest matrix [8], a quantitative approach is applied to assess the potential role of each stakeholder in relation to specific objectives and challenges.

The proposed methodological approach is applied to the inner territory of the Alta Valsesia in Piedmont (North of Italy), which a Research Unit of the Politecnico di Torino (Polito RU) assumed as case study in the context of the research project of national interest (PRIN) "*B4R - Branding4Resilience*" (www.branding4resilience.it, accessed on 4 April 2022) (Ferretti et al., 2022). The Alta Valsesia is also part of a wider territory, which has recently become an inner area according to the SNAI classification (Regional Council Resolution n. 28/5251 of 21 June 2022) This paper illustrates the process followed by the Polito RU in the application of the stakeholder analysis performed during the first year of the B4R research project [9], and highlights its current relevance in supporting public entities in the decision process that has been recently launched to define the SNAI strategy and the related projects to be funded.

The article is structured in four main sections. The methodological approach is presented in the first section, while the study area is described in the second section. The data sample and the results are illustrated respectively in the third and fourth section. Lastly, the conclusion focuses the discussion on the main results and presents further implementations.

2 Methodological Approach

This research focuses on the methodology for the stakeholder mapping proposed by Aubrey Mendelow [10]. In particular, the methodological approach is based on the Power-Interest assessment by Olander and Landin [8], which developed the original Power-Dynamism matrix into the Power-Interest matrix. The assumed methodology is proposed with some new operations (Fig. 1) to assess the role of each stakeholder more precisely by means of the use of numerical scores. Four phases are proposed, which guide a flexible application of this classical methodology to be adapted in different study areas, by requiring amendments and implementations to better represent the field of expertise and the role of specific actors.

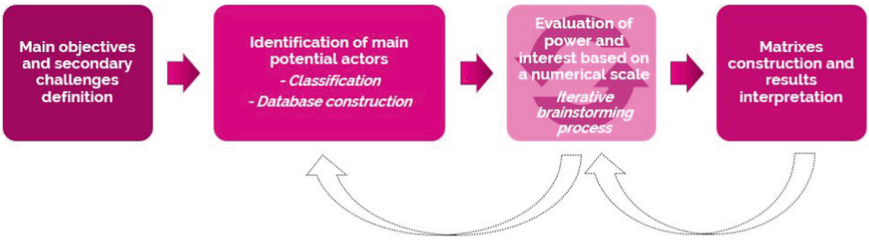


Fig. 1. Flowchart of the methodological approach (Source: Authors' elaboration)

2.1 Main Objective and Secondary Challenges Definition

The research's main objective and some secondary challenges must be defined at the beginning of the analysis to identify the correct domain of actors to be classified and eventually involved in subsequent enhancement processes. In particular, an excellent method to define the main objective and challenges is to apply the well-known S.M.A.R.T. criteria [11] to avoid possible errors caused by non-specific and insufficiently explicit objectives. S.M.A.R.T. criteria are intended as guidelines to help the management of the challenges and their realization. According to these criteria, the objective of the research and the secondary challenges must be [11]:

- Specific: target a specific area of action;
- Measurable: quantify or at least suggest an indicator of progress;
- Assignable: specify who will do it;
- Realistic: based on available resources (material and human);
- Time-related: with a specific deadline when the results can be achieved.

It is important to notice that the main objective or the challenges must not necessarily fit each criterion, but the more the challenge adheres to the points, the smarter will be.

2.2 Identification of the Main Stakeholders

Starting from each defined challenge, it is crucial to identify the main stakeholders and potential actors that can be involved in possible enhancement processes. Each stakeholder is classified in a structured database and associated with a unique ID necessary for the subsequent analysis. In this phase, it is important to list and classify the main public and private subjects by considering both their location and their territorial competence (territorial level), their areas of competencies, their juridical forms and reference sectors (Fig. 2).

In order to better identify and classify the main stakeholders and avoid errors, it is crucial to define the areas of competence that must cover all the possible competencies and fields of interest of the research. In particular, the present methodological approach considers different areas of action of the possible actors to intercept all the economic sectors and activities.

The classification process and the identification of the category for each stakeholder (intended as the legal identity of the stakeholder) are crucial to understand how to manage the cooperation for each challenge. This methodology proposes six categories, with

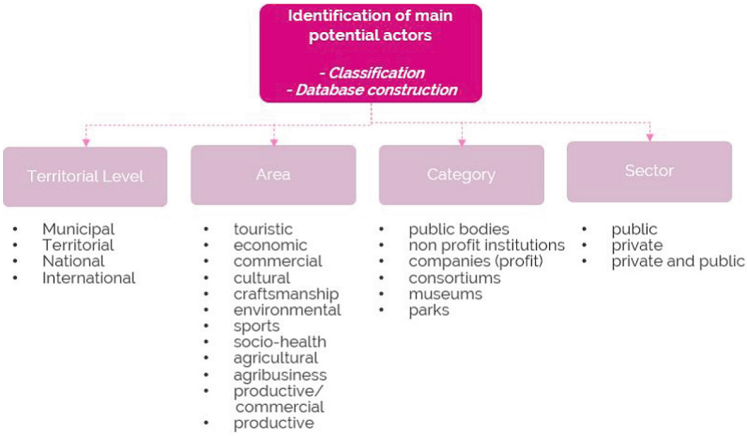


Fig. 2. Identification and classification of the stakeholders. (Source: Authors' elaboration)

particular attention to some specific entities (like museums and parks) that are essential features for inner areas. Public bodies are intended as administrations and other types of government entities both at the local and territorial levels; non-profit associations include voluntary organizations, social promotion associations, philanthropic entities, social enterprises, including social cooperatives, association networks, associations, recognised or unrecognised, and foundations.

2.3 Evaluation of the Stakeholders' Power and Interest Based on a Numerical Scale

Assuming the research's main objective and the defined secondary challenges, it is fundamental to evaluate the power and the interest of the previously identified stakeholders in order to set up the power-interest matrix. The actual levels of stakeholders' interest and power properly reflect the corporate governance framework within which the organization operates.

In order to better specify the methodology assumed and developed in this paper [7], it is important to clarify what is intended for:

- *Power*: the ability to influence strategies or project resources or whether stakeholders have the potential to do;
- *Interest*: how interested they are in the organization or project succeeding or what are the stakeholders' expectations on the purposed strategies;

The proposed quantitative approach is aimed to assess the potential role of each stakeholder by means of the use of numerical scores: this means that the power and interest levels are assessed, assuming a predefined numerical scale. Nevertheless, it is important that the final assessment is made by a group of experts participating in an iterative brainstorming process aimed to reduce subjectivity present in individual assessments.

Each expert should consider the roles and past initiatives of the stakeholder to prevent preconceived assumptions. The roles of stakeholders change in relation to the challenge considered for the analysis; so even if a stakeholder is excluded for a specific challenge due to its null power or interest, it is necessary to reconsider it in relation to the other challenges. The scores identified by the group of experts provide the coordinates for the construction of the power-interest matrixes.

2.4 Matrixes Construction and Results Interpretation

The assessment of stakeholder power and interest levels based on a numerical scale establishes their positions within a double-input matrix: the level of power on the y-axis and the level of interest on the x-axis.

The four quadrants in Fig. 3 identify the following different roles and potential partnerships levels of the considered stakeholders [7]:

- the key stakeholders (KS) or the promoters (high power and high interest);
- the contextual stakeholders (CS) or the latents (high power, low interest);
- the subordinate stakeholders (SS) or the defenders (low power, high interest);
- the marginal stakeholders (MS) or the apathetics (power and low interest).

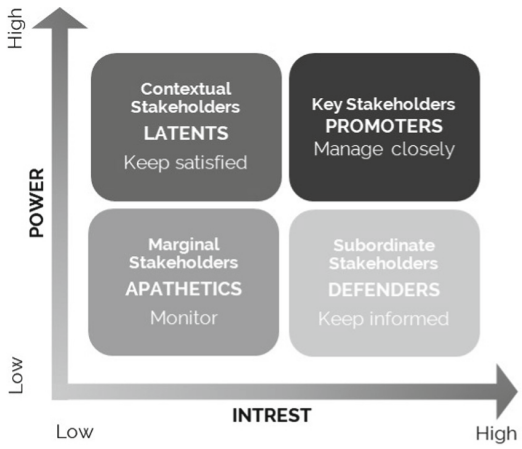


Fig. 3. Stakeholder analysis and mapping based on the power/interest matrix (Source: Author's elaboration on (Mendelow, 1981)

3 Study Area and Data Sample

The study area (Alta Valsesia) is the focus area of Polito RU of B4R project since 2020, and it was included in the SNAI inner area "Valsesia" since 2022. It is an alpine area in the northern part of the province of Vercelli (Piedmont), which takes its name from the Sesia river.

The territory of Alta Valsesia includes 17 Municipalities (Alagna Valsesia, Alto Sermenza, Balmuccia, Boccioleto, Campertogno, Carcoforo, Cervatto, Cravagliana, Fobello, Mollia, Pila, Piode, Rassa, Rimella, Rossa, Scopa, Scopello) as shown in Fig. 4.

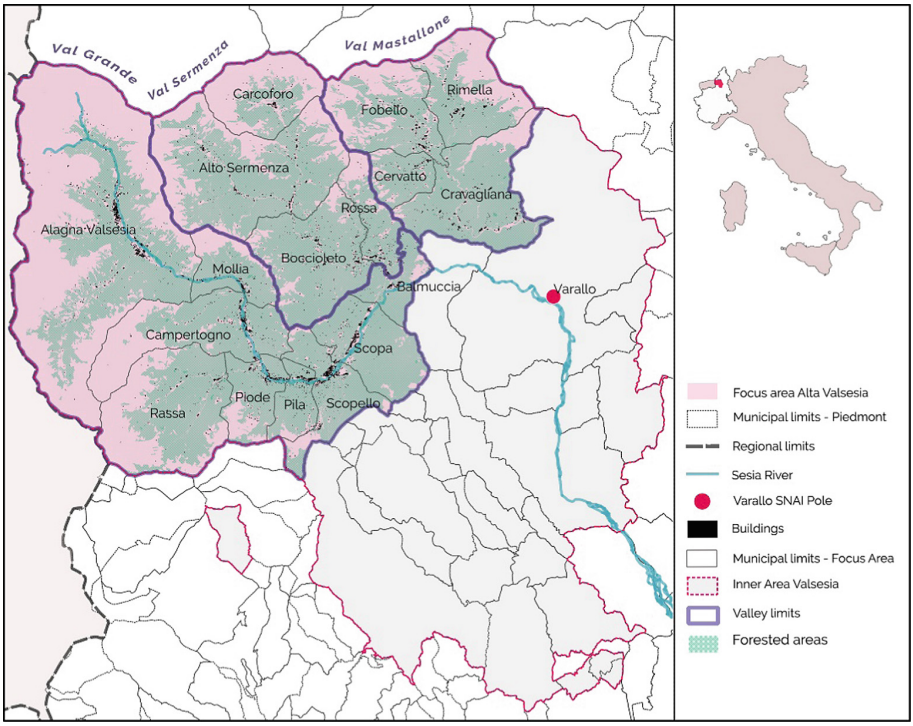


Fig. 4. Territorial framework of the analysis (Source: Authors' elaboration).

The main valley is the Val Grande and extends from Monte Rosa up to Varallo Sesia, classified by SNAI as a "Pole" due to the number of inhabitants (about 7,000) and the presence of commercial activities and some most relevant schools and essential citizenship services. Numerous side valleys take their name from the streams that flow into the Sesia river: on the left orographic side, Val Mastallone and Val Sermenza; on the right side, Val Sorba, Valle Artogna, Val Vogna and Val d'Otro. The Alta Valsesia is considered "the greenest valley in Italy" thanks to the rainy weather that characterize the valley: the great nature capital is evident considering that Alta Valsesia is located within the UNESCO area of the Sesia Val Grande Geopark, which also includes the Alta Val Sesia and Alta Val Strona Natural Park.

During the first year of the B4R project, contextually with territorial data analyses and mapping [12, 13], the Polito RU analysed the stakeholders of the Alta Valsesia territory: once an initial list of stakeholders was drawn up, a structured database was built and progressively increased on the basis of the information gathered during a series of surveys and interviews carried out in parallel with other territorial analyses. Table 1 shows the data structure of the main variables included in the database.

Table 1. Data structure of the main variables (Source: Authors' elaboration).

Data structure	Data content	Data value	
Variable name	Short description	Vocabulary	Levels
Territorial localization	physical localization of the headquarters of the stakeholder	closed	international, national, territorial, local
Level of competence	territorial area within which it is possible to detect the effects of each stakeholder's actions	closed	international, national, territorial, local
Legal identity	legal form assumed by the stakeholder according to the Italian legislative framework	closed	companies, no profit organizations (NGO), public entities, museums, parks
Area of interest	identification of the principal area in which the stakeholder operates	closed	touristic, economic, commercial, cultural, craftsmanship, environmental, sports, socio-health, agricultural, agribusiness, productive/commercial, productive
Sector	identification of the sector in which the stakeholder operates	closed	public, private

The final data sample included 105 stakeholders with a possible role for the resilient development of the territory and its communities. Each municipality was considered during the analysis by taking into account the role of each local administration as a potential actor and by considering the entire area as a system of multiple actors that collaborate together to achieve different goals.

During these exploratory analyses of the territory, the knowledge of the stakeholders and the direct contact with some of them allowed the Polito RU to identify and map the main stakeholders, as well as to highlight peculiarities, values and fragilities of Alta Valsesia. The research activities developed in the study area by the Polito RU supported the identification of the main stakeholders of the territory and their classification brought out their role.

4 Results

During the first year of the B4R research project, all the four Research Units developed a stakeholder analysis and mapping based on the power/interest matrix (Mendelow 1981): the main objective and the secondary challenges were jointly defined and then each RU adapted it to its context and also applied specific operations to assess the role of each stakeholder. Polito RU applied the aforementioned methodological approach to the Alta Valsesia territory to identify the main stakeholders and actors to determine the main potential actors to be involved enhancement processes to reactivate the territory.

4.1 Main Objectives and Secondary Challenges Definition

The stakeholders analysis presented in this research assumed the main research framework of the B4R project and the main objective to define strategies for a resilient development of inner territories and their communities. Then B4R research group preliminarily defined also eight secondary challenge, as a reflection of specific outcomes to be achieved (Fig. 5). (Ferretti et al. 2022)

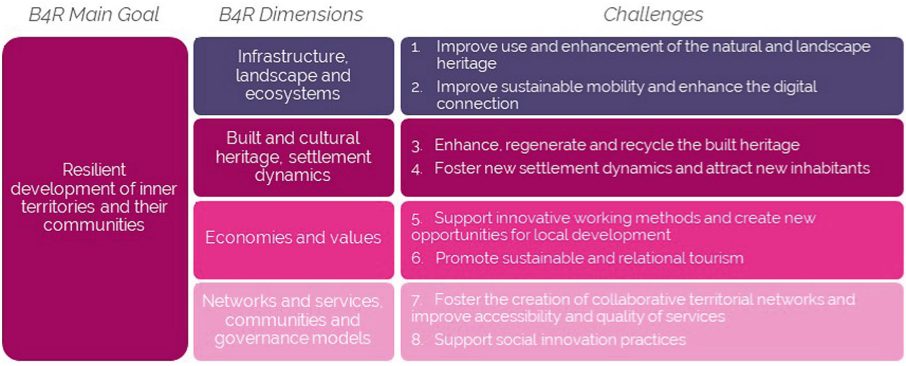


Fig. 5. The B4R main objective and eight secondary challenges. (Source: Authors' elaboration on Ferretti et al. 2022).

In particular, the eight challenges were classified in the four dimensions used during the first year of B4R project in parallel with exploratory data analyses and mapping[14]:

- Dimension 1: Infrastructure, landscape and ecosystems;
- Dimension 2: Built and cultural heritage, settlement dynamics;
- Dimension 3: Economies and values;
- Dimension 4: Networks and services, communities and governance models.

The eight challenge refers to different analysis topics [14]: Dimension 1 is mostly related to the natural capital and the development of technological and telecommunication networks, whereas the Dimension 2 deals with material and immaterial heritage and the types of settlements. Dimension 3, instead, explores the economic context and dynamism by analyzing the main economic sectors and the real estate market, while Dimension 4 refers to policy and planning tools with a special attention to key actors and communities.

4.2 Identification of the Main Stakeholders

The Polito RU identified and classified 105 stakeholders: most of them are public entities (37%) and non profit organizations (32%); furthermore, in line with the main objective of economic and tourist enhancement of inner territory, companies (19%) and private or public museums (10%) were identified as possible actors to be involved in future enhancement processes (Fig. 6).

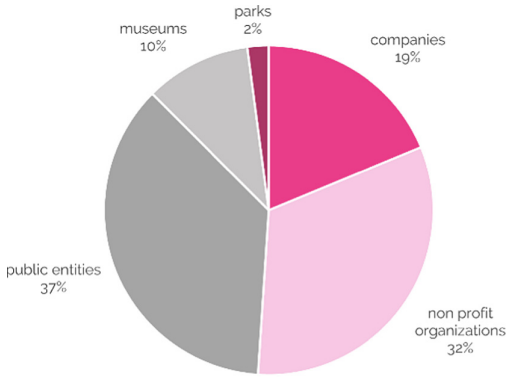


Fig. 6. Classification of the stakeholder legal identity. (Source: Authors' elaboration).

Results showed in Fig. 6 underlined the public and non-profit character of most of the stakeholders in Alta Valsesia (81%), prevalent than the profit sector (19%).

Among the public entities, all 17 municipal administrations of Alta Valsesia and all second-level bodies involved in the coordination between municipalities were identified. These include the Unione Montana dei Comuni della Valsesia, which is responsible for planning the socio-economic development of the area, managing the associated services and defining unitary strategies and actions. Another important institution is the Local Action Group (GAL) Terre del Sesia, constituted as a consortium company with mixed public-private participation that supports rural development projects through the enhancement of local traditions and culture, typical products, and traditional agricultural and craft activities.

Among the non-profit organisations of social utility (NGO) it is important to cite the Fondazione Valsesia Onlus, which was established with the aim of facilitating collaborative networks, social planning and active citizenship. Some NGO are aimed to support people in physical and social disadvantage: this highlights the presence of collaborative networks at the citizens level; in particular, the Social Cooperative "Il Bucaneve" pursues the objective to help disadvantaged people in the job hunting. Lastly, among the associations related to the economic area there is "Spazi Comuni", which offers free wi-fi stations in the municipalities of Alto Sermenza, Carcoforo, Fobello, Rassa, Rossa and Varallo, thus offering a new service for citizens and smartworkers.Among the companies there are groups such as the CAI (Varallo section of Italian Alpine Club), which has been active in the area since 1867, and some companies connected with the management of strategic activities and facilities for mountain tourism, such as the company Monterosa 2000 S.p.A. and Rifugi Monterosa MBG srl. Companies related to river sports were also identified as relevant in the mapping: among these are the Centro Canoa Rafting Monrosa (Balmuccia), Sesia Rafting (Vocca) and Centro Rafting & Canyoning Valsesia Sport (Scopello).

Considering the category of museums, 10 stakeholders were identified, including the Pinacoteca di Varallo and the Museo Walser di Pedemonte (Alagna Valsesia) and the Ecomuseo della Valsesia, with several points of attraction spread throughout the territory. Parks also play an important role despite their low percentage (2%) due to the

low number of legal identities; among them there is the UNESCO area of the Sesia Val Grande Geopark, which also includes the Alta Valsesia and Alta Val Strona Natural Park.

Results of preliminary descriptive analyses show the area of interest of the identified stakeholders and highlight the relevance of the economic and touristic field, as well as the tourism industry as the driving force for this territory (Fig. 7).

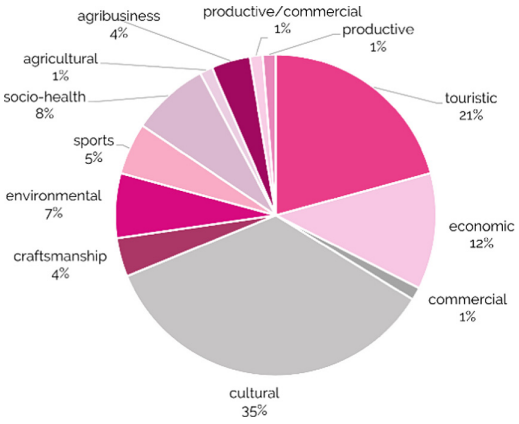


Fig. 7. Classification of the area of interst. (Source: Author's elaboration).

Results show also that there is a considerable percentage of stakeholders operating in the cultural field (35%) and in the tourism sector (21%), while only a little group operate in the commercial, productive and agricultural sectors (1%).

In the cultural area, some important associations specifically promote the knowledge and dissemination of the Walser culture and their lands (Folk Group Die Walser Im Land, Walser Gruppe Rima S. Giuseppe and the Cultural Association Walser Presmell in Valle Vogna).

In relation to the tourism sector (21%) an important stakeholder is the Local Tourist Reception and Promotion Agency of Vercelli and Valsesia (ATL) which disseminates tourist information related to the territory and provides communication campaigns on the tourist offer. An active role for tourism is also played at the municipal level by the Pro Locos which organise entertainment activities for the population and tourists.

In the economic area (12%) there are some institutions that promote initiatives and activities for companies like the Confindustria Novara Vercelli Valsesia, which promotes the development of production activities through the representation of common interests, and the Young Entrepreneurs Novara Vercelli Valsesia, which launches initiatives to promote the inclusion of new entrepreneurs in the life of the association, in line with the aims of the national movement of Young Entrepreneurs of Confindustria.

For the environmental area (7%) is noteworthy to mention the Monterosa Foreste Association, which coordinates and supports forestry policies by promoting the sustainable use of agro-sylvo-pastoral resources, and the Società Valsesiana Pescatori Sportivi, which currently holds a concession from the Province of Vercelli for around 300 km of water (Sesia and tributaries) and traditionally deals with the reproduction of native fish

(at risk of extinction, such as the marble trout and the grayling) and the protection of the river environment. On the other hand, in the area of craftmanship (4%) it is important to mention the Artificial Marble Association of Rima S. Giuseppe which promotes local crafts, proposing to revitalise the artificial marble technique by building up a group of highly qualified and professional craftsmen to actively participate in professional and commercial initiatives, in cooperation with other public and private bodies active in the Valsesia area.

Lastly, the preliminary descriptive analyses show also interesting results concerning the territorial localization and the level of competence of the stakeholders (Fig. 8).

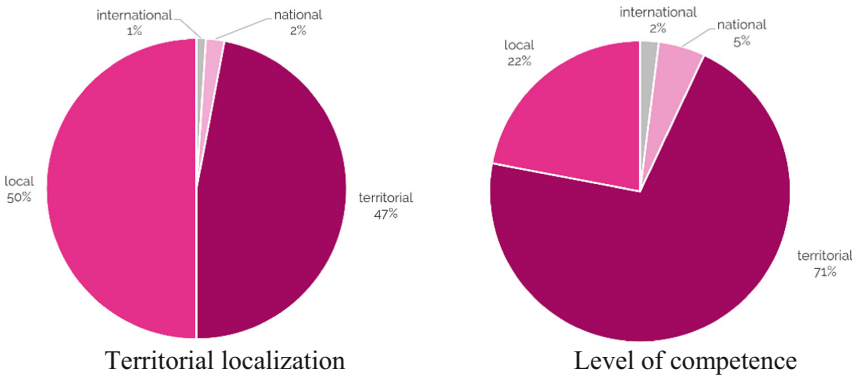


Fig. 8. Classification of the area field. (Source: Author's elaboration).

Fifty percent of the identified stakeholders operate at a local level, although it is important to emphasize that the range of action of these bodies dealing with the protection of the territory and valley settlements is often not only municipal but instead creates important repercussions at a supra-local level. Only small percentages (1–2%), on the other hand, refer to entities operating at national and international levels: among these, a prominent role is played by the Agency for Territorial Cooperation with the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI). By considering the level of competence, a huge group of stakeholders operates at the territorial level (71%) highlighting a range of impacts that exceeds the limits of the study area; lastly, in relation to the international level of competence it is noteworthy to mention the cultural association "Presmell" that promotes the Walser culture and legacy.

4.3 Evaluation of the Stakeholders' Power and Interest Based on a Numerical Scale

The evaluation process was based on the proposed quantitative approach aimed to assess the potential role of each stakeholder by means of the use of numerical scores: to this aim the Polito RU assessed the power and interest levels for each identified stakeholder, by assuming a predefined numerical scale. In line with the methodological approach the best way to avoid errors was to discuss each assessment among the members of the

RU: therefore, numerous meetings and brainstorming sessions were organized in order to assess the power and the interest of each stakeholder and potential actor by sharing information and points of view.

The Polito RU decided to use a 4-level scale to evaluate the power and interest of the stakeholders with these specific ranges:

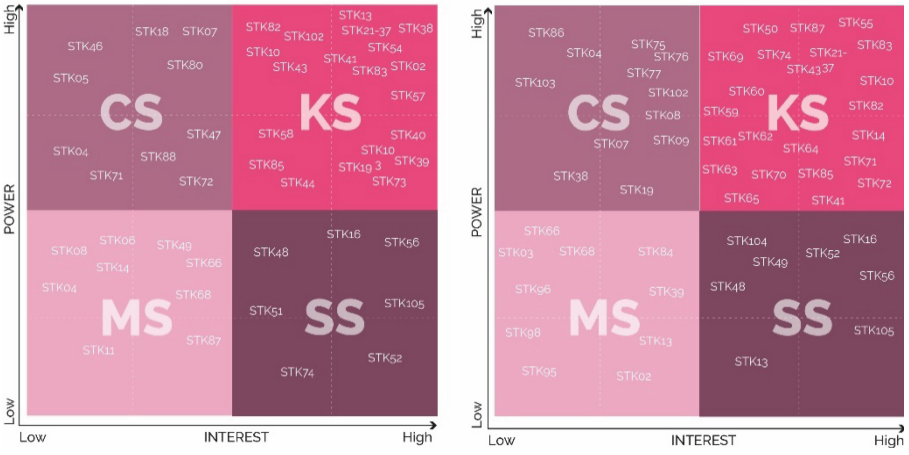
- 1 – low power/interest;
- 2 – medium-low power/interest;
- 3 – medium-high power/interest;
- 4 – high power/interest.

It is important to underline that each stakeholder was analysed in relation to each of the 8 abovementioned challenges; therefore, each stakeholder could present a different assessmnet for each of them, both in term of interest and power level.

After the construction of the eight matrixes, another discussion among the members of the RU was opened in order to eventually refine the assessments and to correctly interpret results.

4.4 Matrixes Construction and Results Interpretation

The stakeholder mapping constitutes the last phase of the proposed methodology: 8 different power-interest matrices were elaborated, one for each identified challenge. Two matrixes, based on the challenges defined for Dimension 3 "Economies and Values" are presented below as an example of the total elaborations (Fig. 8).



(a) Challenge n. 5: Support innovative working methods and create new opportunities for local development

(b) Challenge n. 6: Promote sustainable and relational tourism

Fig. 9. Examples of power-interst matrixes. (Source: Author's elaboration).

The matrixes presented in Fig. 9a individuate 21 Key Stakeholders (KS) that are mostly public bodies and associations: the Unione Montana dei Comuni della Valsesia

(Mountain Union of the Municipalities of Valsesia) (STK83) and the local administrations (STK from 21to 37) promote numerous initiatives aimed at the creation of new opportunities for local development. Another key stakeholder for this challenge is the Confindustria and the Gruppo Giovani Imprenditori (Young Entrepreneurs Group) of Vercelli (STK57) together with the Confederazione Italiana Agricoltori (Italian Confederation of Farmers) of Novara and Vercelli (STK40) and the Confederazione Nazionale dell'Artigianato (CNA) Piemonte Nord (STK39); these actors have both the power and the interest in elaborating shared strategies for the development of local economies and results can be achieved only if these organizations collaborate together and support local actors in managing strategies.

For the promotion of sustainable tourism Fig. 9b, presents 25 Key Stakeholders (KS) among which the Agenzia di Promozione Turistica Locale (ATL) Valsesia Vercelli (STK10), which plays the role of coordinator of all other touristic subjects, such as the Consorzio degli Operatori Turistici della Valsesia (Visit Monterosa) (STK43), the Capanna Osservatorio Regina Margherita (STK14) and the Google Local Guides (STK55). All the museums active in Alta Valsesia (STK from 59 to 70) and all the cultural and sports associations (context stakeholders) could contribute, albeit with a more circumscribed power, to the creation of a stronger experiential and relational offer for tourists.

Both matrixes individuate the Contextual Stakeholders (CS), most of which are private associations (STK71-72) and organizations at territorial or international level that are not so related to specific projects in the Valsesia Area. The Subordinate Stakeholders (SS) the Marginal Stakeholders (MS) constitute the smallest group of stakeholders because they have the lowest power for these two goals: in these quadrants it is possible to find little associations and actors at the local and municipal level that could not change the strategies but they can only support key actors during the process.

5 Conclusions

The stakeholder analysis illustrated in this paper supported the B4R Polito RU in understanding the interests and power of the main stakeholders that could play a role in possible enhancement processes in the Alta Valsesia area [7].

The four-phase methodological approach is based on the Power-Interest matrix and proposes some new operations to more precisely assess the role of each stakeholder by means of the use of numerical scores.

Transforming the methodological approach from a well-known qualitative evaluation to a quantitative- score-based evaluation opens new possibilities and makes the results more unbiased. In this application, 105 stakeholders of different fields and thematic areas were analysed and eight challenges were assumed as references to evaluate the interest and the power of the selected stakeholders in the perspective of developing new touristic and cultural enhancement strategies for inner territories [15].

The effectiveness of this new methodological approach is evident in relation to the outcomes and results that show how each stakeholder group can be interested in relation to the different aims of the project and therefore support the choice of specific strategies. At the same time, results show whether stakeholders have the power to make changes in the territory and how big the impact of their actions could be.

Results of this stakeholders analysis could be a useful tool to support decisional processes and strategies by selecting key stakeholders that must be involved during participatory tables, focus groups and other specific dialogues with the local actors for the Alta Valsesia area development. The stakeholders mapping – as a quantitative analysis - could be the basis for identifying potential actors in enhancement processes, such as the ongoing decision process that currently involves local actors and public administrations for the definition of the SNAI strategy. At the same time, the identification and classification of each potential actor could support the identification of possible new networks and relations between actors but also the understanding of existing disputes or conflicts that may affect the strategies efficacy. Stakeholders mapping could also help to avoid forgetting some key players in the area, risking creating new obstacles and problems for the development of each challenge by not involving someone in the processes.

Moreover, it is worth noting that different kind of power [7] exist such as: possession of knowledge, control of the environment or formal power, this level of specificity could be added to the mapping in further research by improving matrixes with a third dimension of analysis. At the same time, it is important to remember that important stakeholders at the territorial level (financial institutions, customers, suppliers, shareholders and unions) may belong to more than one stakeholder group and they group differently according to the main objectives and goals.

In this regard, further developments of the proposed methodology could include the integration of other stakeholders mapping methods (i.e. Venn diagram) in order to also understand the connections and links (existing and potential) between the stakeholders. Furthermore, the different evaluation of each potential actor could also be georeferenced and represented in cartography to highlight any spatial clusters and territorial thematic hubs.

The main spillover of this research is to use the stakeholder analysis as an important preliminary tool to manage participatory enhancement processes with discussion tables, and the involvement of the actors, with the aim of overcoming the existing local conflicts, applying objective methodologies and considering, with more awareness, the different political influences and interests of the main stakeholders. For example, this research could have a little but relevant impact for the SNAI programming, in the context of which this approach could be applied and tested.

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