

Intermunicipal Co-operation in Marginal Territories for the Rebalancing of Territorial Gaps. The Sicani Area in Sicily (Italy)

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Abstract. The scientific debate in the field of territorial policies shows a renewed interest in marginal territories as hybrid contexts that need to raise awareness of hidden qualities in order to re-balance existing territorial gaps.

Starting from the framework of the B4R Branding4Resilience research project of national interest, the contribution of the University of Palermo explores the Sicani Area in Sicily (Italy) as a paradigmatic case of marginality for which territorial branding strategies need to be developed. The paper discusses case study analyses and the results of the co-visioning phase of the research project: a process of strategic spatial visioning to recompose the existing system of relationships in a coherent territorial vision, identify a branding strategy and show that effective cooperation and networking can represent the path to development that can lead marginal territories out of isolation.

The work in the Sicani Focus Area in Sicily provides a framework that can support administrations in the formulation of development strategies and policies.

Keywords: Marginal Territories · Territorial Co-operation · Resilience

1 The Background

1.1 Territorial Inequalities

Throughout Europe, as a result of the polarisation of settlement processes, development gaps have gradually widened between catalysing urban formations and areas undergoing progressive depopulation in which pockets of marginality are spreading [1, 2]. Throughout Europe, the polarisation of settlement processes has gradually widened the development gap between the catalysing urban formations and the areas of progressive depopulation where the marginal areas are spreading [1, 2].

Although the population of the EU has grown by 4% over the last twenty years, this growth has been uneven and has widened the gap between urban and rural areas in countries. This is due to the polarisation of settlement processes and transformation dynamics around central urban areas and rural-urban migration leading to the desertification of villages and towns, the phenomenon of brain drain and the fact that the population is on average significantly older than that of cities. Rural areas account for 83% of the EU's

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total surface area, home to almost 30% of Europe's population (137 million people), and more than half of these rural areas are located far from cities [3]. In these areas, increasing social and economic marginalisation and territorial and environmental imbalances have highlighted the urgent need to re-engage with territorial cohesion policies and their possible developments by placing the issue of the development of marginal territories at the centre of scientific debate and public policies.

In addition, it should be emphasised that what these areas have in common is that their overall performance, level of development, access to services or quality of life of the population is relatively poor compared to neighbouring areas, which means that there is a risk that some areas will become inner peripheries in the future [4]. This risk is particularly high in those territories that have access to basic services (such as education and health) but this access is already poor or depends on a single service centre that, if it gets into difficulties, would undermine the entire territory. These conditions must be assessed in the territorial development policies in order to reduce the current disparities and the level of peripherality and create the development conditions necessary for at least basic services in the current peripheral areas.

In Italy, where marginality and abandonment in inner territories are the result of a temporally stratified process in which long-term and very long-term dynamics are interwoven and overlap [5], the issues of territorial imbalances and spatial inequalities have been at the centre of disciplinary debate for several years and are at the heart of the interesting experience of the SNAI - Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne [6, 7], that had the merit of recognising these territories as (material and immaterial) identities to be exploited and as important opportunities for economic growth. However, although the SNAI has undoubtedly opened an important innovation path that attempts to translate the place-based approach to local development into an organic policy design, it also encounters numerous critical aspects that highlight the limitations of the parameters that lead to standardisation and normalisation of complex phenomena [8] and the limitations of the predefined territorial context. The rigidity of the administrative boundaries of the inner areas defined by the SNAI, which does not recognise the systems of relationships that exist within a sub-regional territory and hinders their development, but stops at purely statistical data that do not take into account the often-virtuous diverse realities of cooperation that exist in the territories in question. This limitation and the deterioration in the level of peripherality of Italian municipalities – the analysis was carried out in 2020 compared to 2014 – that concerns 1,272 municipalities and 7,894,871 inhabitants, confirms the risk that some areas will become inner peripheries if no specific territorial development policies are taken and emphasises that the development planning of these areas must go beyond data, beyond administrative boundaries and beyond the mere provision of basic services.

Even if the expression 'inner areas', which emerged in the context of these ongoing experiments in relation to the classification of what was defined as the 'level of peripherality' of the municipalities, has gradually taken on a polysemic character and has been enriched with a complexity of meaning that alludes to the inherent qualities of these territories, 'different' from those of large urban centres, where global flows and

more dynamic demographic processes are intertwined [9, 10], it is necessary to recognise the intrinsic values of these territories and to strongly consider the already existing inter-municipal cooperative relationships, that represent an important strength.

The aim of this article is to analyse how inter-municipal cooperation intervenes in the construction of an integrated territorial development strategy aimed at equalisation and enhancement, how these cooperations are supported and where, on the other hand, they have difficulties in converging and integrating due to the excessive presence of fragmented policies that exist in the same territory.

1.2 The B4R Research Project

Against this background, the research "B4R Branding4Resilience. Tourist infrastructure as a tool to enhance small towns by drawing resilient communities and new open habitats" proposes to shift the concept from the narrow definition of inner areas to the broader concept of inner territories, which encompasses the contexts affected by depopulation, peripherality, ageing and lack of services and infrastructure as fragile and hybrid spaces with a high territorial complexity both in terms of spatial development strategies and governance issues [11].

Inner territories are understood as areas that need to be sensitised to their hidden qualities and spaces of opportunity, which require a process-oriented and multi-sectoral approach that is able to bring together interests, conflicts, but also different potentials and resources.

The B4R research project takes up this change of perspective by focussing on marginal areas as drivers of innovation and testing grounds for new development dynamics and scenarios [12] and examining the potentials and resources specifically in connection with space, settlements and landscapes [13].

As part of the B4R project, the areas were viewed through different interpretative lenses. One of these lenses was the analysis of governance processes with a particular focus on the capacity expressed by the territories to join forces beyond individual municipal competences to work on common issues.

The project therefore aimed to assess the extent to which there was a propensity for inter-municipal aggregation and, if there was, how this propensity, which is considered an important lever for the implementation of effective development measures, was articulated and with what objectives.

It was assumed that institutional fragmentation is an obstacle for marginal territories to overcome and that the ability to co-operate and 'join forces' are crucial levers to overcome the territorial gaps of these areas compared to medium and large cities in order to achieve critical mass.

2 Methodology

2.1 The B4R Methodology

At the beginning of the research project, each Research Unit (RU) selected a Focus Area (FA) to be analysed and compared in order to obtain a meaningful sample of fragile inner territories and to sketch a portrait of the current situation in Italy. The four FAs are

located in the Italian regions of the four RUs, Marche, Sicily, Trentino, Piedmont, and represent two Alpine and two Mediterranean regions.

B4R is based on three main phases, each corresponding to a research work package:

1. Exploration; 2. Co-design; 3. Co-visioning.

The "Exploration" phase, carried out in the first year of the research, served to investigate the territorial contexts from different points of view, focussing on spatial interactions, and it combines and integrates different quantitative and qualitative tools and methods, thus offering a unique methodological approach. The second phase is the co-design with communities, with the aim of proposing useful transformations of small infrastructures and operational branding actions in selected focus areas. Four "Co-design" workshops were conceived as a way to approach the areas through project-based explorations, uncovering key questions of the research topic which will be reviewed and deepened through the design. Indeed, during the co-design workshops, transformations and minimal interventions in the urban and territorial context are summarised in project proposals. In each workshop, proposals are developed that address the specificities of each area and succeed in analysing the paradigmatic nature of each pilot case and identifying possible branding actions. The third phase is the development of co-visioning processes in collaboration with local actors and institutions.

2.2 The Co-visioning Phase

In the "Co-visioning" phase, B4R proposes a process of strategic spatial co-visioning to reformulate the current system of relationships in a coherent territorial vision and identify a brand strategy that can uncover and activate territorial capital in all its dimensions (natural, cultural, built, financial, social, institutional) to increase the transformative capacity of communities.

In this phase, a collaborative process is set in motion in which citizens, local communities and other stakeholders actively work together to design and develop a shared vision of territorial development that transcends individual administrative boundaries.

The co-visioning phase is organised in a sequence of methodological steps (Fig. 1).

The first step involves the elaboration of a Criticality and Values Matrix, which is necessary to summarise the potential of the territory and identify the most critical issues to be resolved, based on the results of the analyses carried out in the "Exploration" and "Co-Design" phases.

The second step is oriented towards the construction of the strategic programme by defining a sequence of strategic axes - strategies - project actions that outline a long-term vision for the development of the territory. In this phase, a first mapping draft of the strategies is drawn up, the so-called Territorial Vision Draft, which aims to concisely summarise all the themes and the location of the project actions that have emerged during the elaboration of the strategic vision.

The third step provides for the organisation and implementation of a phase of collective planning and validation of the work carried out through the so-called "co-vision dialogues", which can be carried out according to different methodologies, such as expert interviews, focus groups or the organisation of face-to-face workshops, and which aim to validate the strategic programme and the draft territorial vision realised in the previous

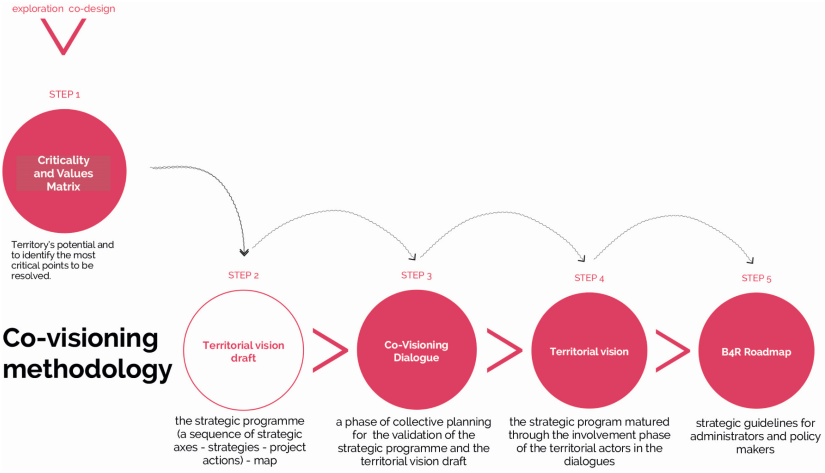

Fig. 1. The Co-visioning methodology scheme.

step. In the collective strategic validation and co-design phase, both the territorial vision programme and its spatialisation are reassembled in a coherent way.

In the final two steps, in the light of what has matured in the phase of participation of the territorial actors in the dialogues, the final version of the strategic programme and the Territorial Vision will be elaborated, as well as a Road Map, strategic guidelines as a result of the co-visioning phase that will accompany the administrations in the formulation of support policies in which the strategic programmes of all 4 strategic programmes of all 4 Focus Areas involved in the research project. The branding strategy will seek to achieve a coherent spatial vision of development in order to increase the area's capacity for interaction and to valorise and connect the tangible and intangible heritage and resources. In other words, a new development path that enhances the value of the different territorial capitals through design.

The co-visioning phase therefore aims to actively experiment in the territories the definition of transformation visions that go beyond the boundaries of individual administrations and aim at cooperation between actors by calling for collaborative forms.

3 The Co-visioning Phase in the Sicani Focus Area

3.1 The Sicani Focus Area

The Sicani Focus Area (Fig. 2) is part of a large part of the regional territory on the edge of the polarisation of the large urban coastal areas (Palermo, Catania and Messina). The selected area is composed of 18 municipalities that are not coastal, hilly or mountainous, have a spatially contiguous area and each have fewer than 7,000 inhabitants, a total population of 52,156 inhabitants (31 December 2021) and an average density of 54.9 inhabitants per square kilometre. The 18 municipalities are experiencing a progressive population decline (−15.8% between 2011 and 2021), an ageing population (the average age index in 2020 is 279.79, compared to the regional value of 159), are characterised

by economic weakness (the average per capita income is 12,469 euros, compared to the regional value of 15,846 euros), difficult accessibility in terms of mobility and low access to primary services. Looking at this area from the perspective of the SNAI (updated classification of the level of peripherality of municipalities by 2022), 7 municipalities are categorised as Ultra-peripheral, 10 as Peripheral and 1 as Intermediate, of which only 8 belong to the Sicani Inner Area.

The analyses conducted in the Sicani Focus Area through site inspections, mapping, interviews, other qualitative explorations and the co-design workshop [14, 15] revealed resources, critical factors, actors and dynamics operating in the area as a result of both informal processes and ongoing formal policies and projects.

The trends reveal a fragile and complex area, but one in which transformative sparks of interest can be recognised that can be harnessed to develop a possible vision of the future.

The experiments in the field of relational tourism, the ability to attract new inhabitants, the strong impetus for active association and the ongoing efforts to valorise the rural and artisanal traditions of this territory, which are generating new economic sectors, should be used as levers to create a future based on the regenerative rediscovery of the many environmental and cultural resources available, but also on a new role for this territory in relation to the coastal and metropolitan areas, to activate forms of collaboration and integration. Thus, interpreting this area as a "constellation of people and places", the Sicani Focus Area has multiple opportunities to create new networks and socio-institutional structures that can catalyse the capacity of local communities to mobilise resources and specific assets present in the area, thus improving the quality of life and development opportunities.

Today, the various policies and projects act in an uncoordinated manner: each of them pursues objectives set by national and/or regional policies to which it has adhered to obtain funding, without having a truly unified development strategy. The aggregated geometry is therefore variable and constantly subject to change depending on the funding opportunities that present themselves.

So while on the one hand we can observe a very active territory (especially in bottom-up actions) and a tendency towards inter-municipal collaboration and co-operation, on the other hand there is no integrated, coherent and shared development vision, but rather a fragmentation of policies, projects and partial visions of the future. This picture, which is constant in marginal territories where individual municipalities are looking for associative forms to obtain development potential through funding opportunities, leads us to reflect on some important questions: what instruments and approaches can be used to achieve a common vision of development? How can we develop effective shared visions for territorial and community development? And how can communities be involved to implement place-based transformative practises and promote co-learning and co-design activities?

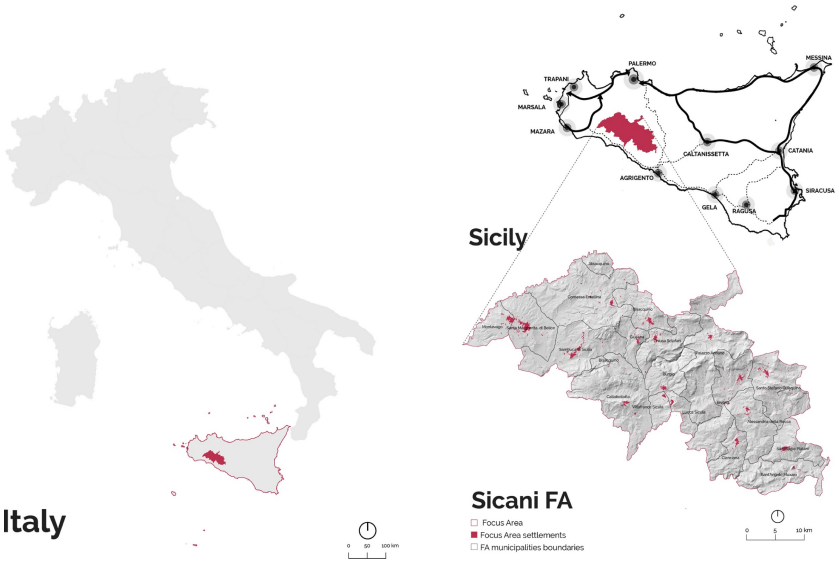

Fig. 2. Sicani Focus Area (FA) in Sicily (Italy).

3.2 A Fragmented Governance

In the Sicani territory, in line with what has happened in other Italian contexts, the renewed interest in the inner areas that has emerged in the field of territorial policies has led to the launching of numerous projects aimed at giving centrality and impetus to those areas of the country that are far from the essential service poles and whose fragility is the result of complex and stratified dynamics over time.

This scenario presents a complex and fragmented landscape, characterized by a variable geometry pacts between a plurality of actors and the application of different planning tools (Fig. 3).

The centrality of the National Strategy for Inner Areas must undoubtedly be acknowledged. Now in its second phase of action, facilitated by the continuity ensured by the 2021–2027 programming period, the strategy has made significant efforts to redefine the development trajectories of inner territories. Its focus lies on fostering greater sustainable territorial competitiveness and fight against demographic decline. In the Sicani territory, alongside the inner area bearing the same name, which is also reaffirmed in the 2021–2027 programming period, there exists a new Inner Area adjacent to the existing one.

In addition to the undeniable centrality of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), the prominence of a second-level actor such as the Local Action Group (LAG) is evident in the area. By its own nature, the LAG operates as an extended form of inter-municipal aggregation (the Sicani LAG has 29 member municipalities) and is capable of fostering direct community participation through regular meetings and various forms of involvement outlined by the LEADER methodology itself. The LAG offers itself as an example of integrated inter-municipal cooperation, operating on a voluntary basis (the adhesion of the municipalities is voluntary) that also includes private actors such

as companies and associations. While the LAG pursues multiple objectives, its focus remains centred on rural production issues. The Sicani LAG has emerged as a significant intermediary actor, excelling in establishing a shared and participatory vision of the area, more so than others.

More recently, there has been the implementation of programming linked to the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), including the so-called 'Bando Borghi' aimed at supporting marginal territories. This initiative focuses on the selection of cultural and social regeneration projects for small historical villages. However, this has led to a fragmentation of initiatives due to the absence of an overall strategic vision for the territories. Additionally, local administrations face considerable difficulties in coordinating actions and resources [16].

The variety of policies and aggregative forms observed, while showing a complex liveliness of the territory, returns an area with variable geometry, according to development themes and specific opportunities that from time to time create different directional cabins and, more in general, spaces of interaction between public and private subjects, as a result of the declination on the territory of different negotiated programming tools.

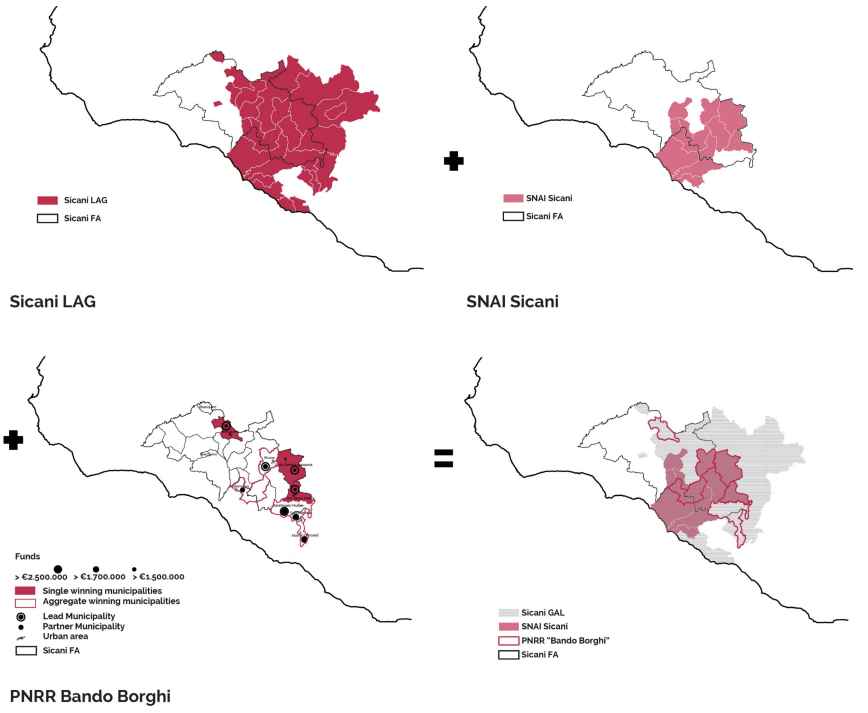

Fig. 3. A fragmented governance: The Sicani National Inner Area, the Sicani LAG and the so-called "Bando Borghi" areas.

3.3 The Co-visionig Method Applied in the Sicani Focus Area

The methodology applied for the definition of a shared territorial development vision for the Sicani Focus Area involved the development of four phases.

The first phase involved the drafting of a Matrix of Resources and Values, which highlighted the endogenous peculiarities that emerged during the Exploration phase. These peculiarities concern not only material aspects, but also - if not primarily - intangible ones such as the strength of the communities, the experiences of territorial enhancement promoted by associations, experiments to attract new inhabitants, and the capacity to build horizontal relations. However, these aspects clash with the objective difficulties faced by these marginal territories in providing services, both material and virtual (such as broadband access). Alongside these, the matrix also highlights ongoing projects, which, while presenting opportunities for the territory's development, contribute to an increasingly fragmented vision of the territory overlaid by numerous different municipal aggregations that intersect with each other but hardly engage in dialogue.

This matrix served as the starting point for the Territorial Vision Draft, which identified strategic axes and possible actions within a long-term vision. This proposal is not intended to address all the critical issues that emerged from the previous phases and were summarised in the matrix, but rather aims to build an integrated and shared vision of the Sicani Focus Area. This vision respects, enhances, and implements the resources present, with the community playing a key role in the co-definition and co-planning phases of development.

The Territorial Vision Draft was subsequently shared, discussed, and implemented through a crucial step of this methodological phase: the co-visioning dialogues. These dialogues served as moments of engagement with communities, institutional stakeholders, associations, and other actors, providing opportunities for discussion and collaboration[1] (Fig. 4). These dialogues with the territory commenced from the theoretical and operational implications arising from the juxtaposition of various initiatives and the imperative to harmonize project interventions in governance. This was aimed at constructing shared visions and implementing place-based transformative practices.

In these meetings, the emphasis was placed on recognizing marginal territories not as mere 'backdrops' to metropolitan areas or destinations for slow travellers' tourism consumption. Instead, they were viewed as territories ripe for regeneration, where cooperative economic models, alternative lifestyles, and cohesive community dimensions can be explored.

In particular, during these meetings, attention was focused on 'co-creative communities' and 'collaborative processes' - factors that the Palermo Research Unit intends to propose as distinctive and characterizing elements of the future development of the Sicani Focus Area. These are understood as emerging forms and indicators of an organisational and cultural shift that points towards local resilience rooted in the territorial context. These concepts embody key features of social innovation, with the aim of identifying

[1] The dialogue activities were conducted both within the framework of activities organised exclusively by the B4R research group and in collaboration with the Sicani LAG within the framework of further research activities and scientific collaboration in which the authors of this article are involved as members of the research unit of the Department of Architecture of the University of Palermo.

culturally-based regeneration projects, community cooperatives, renewed approaches to welfare, interactions with the environment and agriculture, as well as new models of living and working that can revitalize established communities towards new forms of residency or return to inner territories.

These moments of dialogue and engagement followed a structured operational mode: presentation of the results of the analyses carried out; presentation or proposal of initial insights into potential territorial strategies; initiation of dialogue/confrontation through the input of questions, such as:

- What are the theoretical and operational implications arising from the juxtaposition of various initiatives within inner territories?
- Which tools and approaches can facilitate the harmonization of project interventions?
- How can effective shared visions of territorial and community development be formulated?
- In what ways can communities be actively engaged in implementing place-based transformative practices and fostering co-learning and co-design activities?
- How can public institutions serve as intermediary agents, facilitating knowledge and information exchange with communities and enhancing their participatory, propositional, planning, and implementation capacities?

The process of sharing initial results, listening to participants, and collecting proposals was organized through both plenary meetings and the utilization of Open Space Technology technique. This latter methodology, which integrates plenary sessions with thematic discussion tables, fosters open participation in discussions and innovation. It serves as an informal learning tool that facilitates the exchange of information, knowledge, experiences, and innovative ideas. By enhancing the capacity of individuals and groups to address specific issues, strengthening connections among participants, promoting continuous learning, and fostering collective dialogue to find solutions, this technique facilitated genuine participatory co-creation, evaluation, and validation of innovative ideas. This approach aimed to construct a medium to long-term vision for a sustainable future for the territory.

These meetings served to reinforce and amplify, within the strategies and actions, the strong sense of community prevalent in these territories, as well as the experiences of innovation and resilience. They also emphasized the relational and associative capabilities that render these areas fertile ground for the development of co-creative communities, with social and cultural regeneration at the core of a territorial development and regeneration process grounded in inter-municipal cooperation networks. While recognizing the importance of enhancing services and infrastructure, the overarching focus was on networking, cooperation, and collaboration.

The moments of engagement with the Sicani Local Action Group (LAG) were particularly significant, as the LAG is the primary entity responsible for implementing development and regeneration strategies, policies, and interventions in the territory. Moreover, the LAG's activities within the territory entail a substantial participatory process, which equips them not only with comprehensive territorial knowledge beyond analytical and statistical aspects but also with credibility among inhabitants and local administrations. This credibility distinguishes the LAG and positions it as one of the most experienced territorial entities in the area to date. These meetings underscored the emphasis on

community, identity, and territorial excellences, leveraging existing resources as fertile ground for new development and innovation processes.

The outcomes of these meetings extend beyond the mere generation of development ideas for the formulation of a shared and integrated territorial strategy. They also played a crucial role in empowering citizens and enhancing their influence in activities: inhabitants, users, and stakeholders were placed at the forefront of initiatives and became co-creators of strategies.

As a result of the dialogue and engagement process with the territory, strategic axes, strategies, and actions were defined to propose a 'collaborative Sicans' strategy. This approach positions communities, collaborative management forms, dialogue spaces, the establishment of networks, and community cooperatives as the primary drivers of development actions in the Sicani territory.



Fig. 4. The Sicani LAG thematic discussion tables in Santo Stefano Quisquina (1–2) and in Siculiana (3).

3.4 Collaboration as the Connective Tissue of the Territory

The co-visioning of the B4R research proposes a strategic spatial visioning process aimed at consolidating a coherent territorial vision by reassembling the existing system of relationships. This process involves identifying a branding strategy that can reveal and leverage the territorial capital of the Sicani Focus Area across all its dimensions: natural, cultural, built, financial, social, institutional, etc.. The overarching goal is to enhance the community's transformative capacity.

In the context of the B4R research project, branding, typically interpreted through a competitive, quasi-mercantilistic lens, is understood differently. It's seen as a complex socio-political construct and a process of reconstructing the shared imaginary of communities, composed of a multiple interdependency in spatial and temporal dimensions among actors, different types of users, and stakeholders. Based on this approach, the research project conducted dialogue activities with key stakeholders in each research area. The aim was to gather opinions on draft visions and strategies, prioritize and evaluate potential alternatives, and assess the sustainability levels of envisioned choices. This process can be seen as a form of collaborative branding.

In the Sicani Focus Area, the qualitative-quantitative analyses conducted have highlighted two significant findings. Firstly, there exists a fragmented transformative framework, indicating a lack of cohesion in development efforts; secondly, there is a propensity for the emergence of innovative organizational models based on associationism and

cooperation. This is exemplified by the rich network of local associations present in the area.

Based on this observation and recognizing that effective cooperation and networking are essential to lead marginal territories out of isolation, collaboration was deemed the guiding principle for spatial development and transformation actions in the Sicani Focus Area. Hence, the concept of "Collaborative Sicani" (see Fig. 5) was embraced as a central theme (Fig. 5).

Small centres should work together because they need to be part of a "larger location" in order to reach a critical mass [17, 18] necessary not to succumb in the competition with the metropolitan areas and to claim centrality in the policies for the rebalancing of territorial gaps. Forming new inter-municipal alliances and adopting branding strategies that transcend administrative boundaries can lead to a positive-sum outcome. In this scenario, even non-capital areas can achieve critical mass by pooling resources. The objective extends beyond merely attracting capital or residents; it encompasses a complex political and socio-economic dimension.

The Unipa B4R "Collaborative Sicani" strategy aims to stimulate the emergence of collaborative branding initiatives in the territory, looking beyond administrative borders.

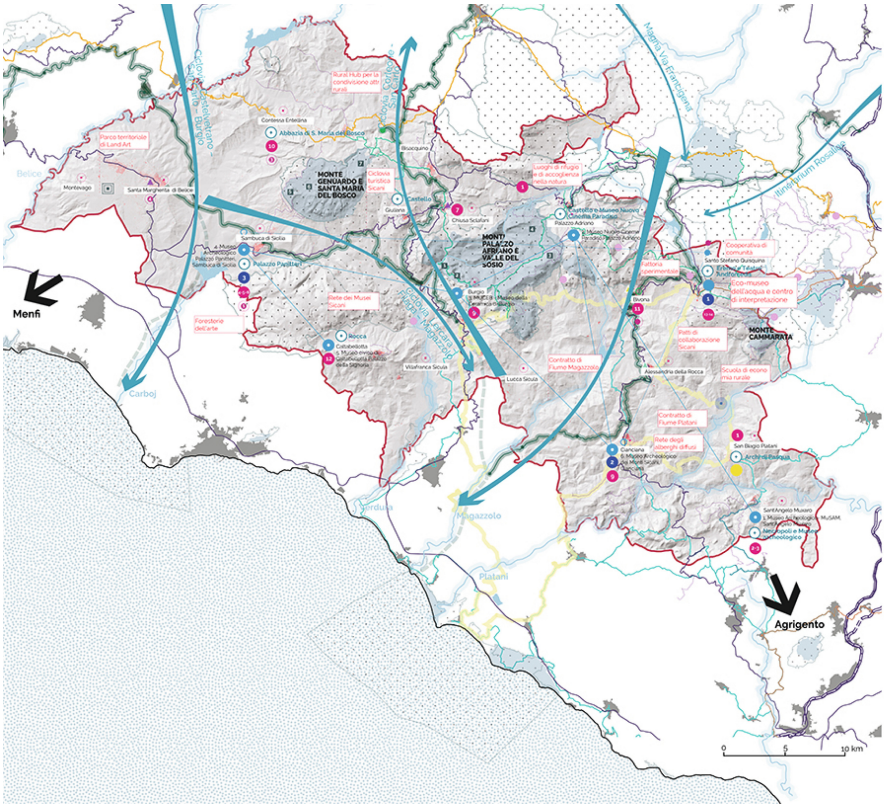

Fig. 5. The Unipa B4R "Collaborative Sicani" strategy.

This approach seeks to enhance visibility and strengthen a shared vision. Some of the strategies discussed with communities and stakeholders revolve around the theme of networks as spaces of opportunity. Among the main strategies proposed are: organizing a new model of mobility as an enabling factor, such as implementing transport-on-demand services and establishing a coast-mountain network of new cycle routes; promoting new collaborative forms of managing disused resources implementing co-operation agreements; strengthening the encounter tourism model thanks to a new hospitality network based on initiatives such as Art Foresterias and "diffuse hotel" network; supporting social and cultural circular economy initiatives, including community cooperatives, a school of circular rural economy, and energy communities.

To attract and retain visitors and talents, small and peripheral Sicani's communities should engage in inter-territorial cooperation in order to enhance their competitiveness and cohesion/resilience.

4 Discussion

The observation of the Sicani Focus Area has revealed the coexistence of various groups that don't always complement each other effectively in terms of goals and actions. Multiple coalitions and flexible alliances form, each pursuing objectives defined at times by national and/or regional policies or projects they've joined to secure funding, lacking a coordinated territorial vision and a clear, long-term development framework.

Over time, the Sicani Local Action Group (LAG) has served as an intermediary entity striving to harmonize the actions resulting from different projects, employing a co-planning approach that emphasizes community involvement. It's within this process that B4R's involvement has been integrated, contributing to the formulation of an integrated strategic vision known as the Sicani Unipa B4R Territorial Vision. This represented a tangible input to the formulation of the LAG Sicani's Strategy for the 2021–2027 programming cycle.

During the co-visioning phase, researchers actively engaged in co-planning processes with local communities to develop branding strategies and operational actions that organize existing projects within a unified vision of territorial development, emphasizing stronger inter-municipal cooperation. Indeed, fostering cooperation among inner territories' municipalities presents a significant challenge. Only through effective collaboration and networking can these areas break free from isolation, avoiding direct competition with metropolitan areas and asserting their centrality in policies aimed at addressing territorial disparities.

The emerging results thus far serve to underline, on one hand, the crucial role played by intermediary entities in fostering genuine inter-municipal cooperation in these territories, and on the other hand, to emphasize the necessity of experimenting with solutions that support co-planning processes with local communities and shared, long-term visions capable of transcending existing administrative fragmentation, thanks to a holistic and integrated perspective.

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