

Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems 1187

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Networks, Markets & People

Communities, Institutions and
Enterprises Towards Post-humanism
Epistemologies and AI Challenges,
Volume 5



Springer

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ISSN 2367-3370

ISSN 2367-3389 (electronic)

Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems

ISBN 978-3-031-74703-8

ISBN 978-3-031-74704-5 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-74704-5>

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**Policies and Practices of Cohesion
and Social Innovation for Inclusive
Cities**



The European Cohesion Policy as an «Agent of Change». The Institutional Impact of the Regional Operational Programmes in Calabria (2000–2020)

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Abstract. In this contribution we present some findings from a National Research Project (PRIN2017 4BE543) on *Regional policies, institutions, and cohesion in the South of Italy*, financed by the Italian Ministry of University and Research and carried out between 2020 and 2023 [1]. In particular, we focus on the impact of the ‘regionalisation’ of the European Cohesion Policy, starting in 2000 with the introduction of the ROPs-Regional Operational Programmes for ‘Objective 1’ regions, under the direct responsibility of Regional Governments. Three cycles of regional programming have now been completed (2000–2006, 2007–2013, and 2014–2020) and it is possible to attempt a long-term assessment of their impact. Leaving aside the overall socio-economic impact of EU expenditures, which is the object of a forthcoming publication [2], in this contribution we will focus on the *institutional* impact of the three ROPs in the region of Calabria, with particular attention to changes in policy making culture, in policy management institutions, as well as in relations among public and private actors.

Keywords: European Cohesion Policy · Local development governance · Calabria

1 Introduction

Calabria is historically among the poorest regions of Italy. Its current productive structure is characterised by a declining, prevailingly small-scale, farming activity and a limited, also very fragmented, industrial base, mostly in low-tech manufacturing and in construction. With the rise of mass-tourism in the 1970s, the region has become an important tourist destination, but has remained trapped in a low-cost, beach-holiday supply model, made of a plurality of scarcely integrated micro-firms. Today, the Calabrian economy is dominated by public sector activities (education, health, public administration and infrastructure, social services) and tourism-oriented services, with very little advanced business services, even in large cities. Public expenditures, hence, represent the dominant driver of the regional economy, a feature which – coupled with the very fragile and fragmented private sector – makes development strategies heavily conditioned by politics and the quality of government.

1.1 Public policy and regional development in Calabria

From 1950 until 1992, Calabria – as the whole of Southern Italy – was the recipient of a massive regional development effort by the National government, the so called ‘Intervento straordinario’, with a typical ‘Fordist-Keynesian’ approach [3]. It benefitted from this policy mostly in terms of public infrastructure: the public works of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s brought water, electricity, sewages, roads, schools and hospitals also to the remotest areas of the region, contributing to a dramatic improvement in the standards of living and a significant socio-cultural modernisation, with the formation of a professional and civil service middle class. The industrialisation programmes, however, privileged other regions¹ and did not succeed in strengthening the local productive basis, which failed to innovate and progressively declined.

In 1992, the Intervento straordinario was terminated and substituted with the European Cohesion Policy (ECP). Starting with the 2000–2006 programming cycle, a significant portion of the ECP resources for less developed regions was transferred directly to the Regional governments (NUTS2), which became responsible for the formulation and implementation of their own ROPs-Regional Operational Programmes.

1.2 The European Cohesion Policy Design and Approach

The ‘regionalisation’ of the European Cohesion Policy (ECP) in 2000 aimed at modernising and homogenising policy making processes across EU regions. In order to obtain resources, Regional governments had to formulate their own ROP, adopt the ECP principles and comply with the Structural Funds (SFs) regulations. This involved – among other things – embracing a strategic approach (multi-year programming), ensuring greater transparency and accountability, and enhancing cooperation among actors (both vertically and horizontally). The introduction of the ROPs, in fact, marked a further strengthening of the principles adopted by the EU at the start of its Cohesion policy [5]: a) the decentralisation of policy making, in a multilevel governance framework; b) the emphasis on bottom-up governance (the ‘subsidiarity’ principle); c) a ‘meritocratic’ access to resources (through public calls and selective evaluation of projects).

A major implementing tool of the ECP approach were, from the beginning, what we loosely call ‘*integrated local development*’ tools, i.e. programmes and projects that integrate different actions in a ‘thematic’ or ‘territorial’ strategy [6]. This involves the cooperation among different local actors, primarily public (municipalities), but also private, for the definition and implementation of a ‘collective’ programme of public expenditures. This approach had already been experimented in the 1990s with the ‘LEADER’ programme for the development of rural areas and – in Italy – with the national ‘Territorial Pacts’ programme.

1.3 The Research Questions

After 20 years of regionalised ECP and three completed programming cycles, the aim of our research project was to ascertain whether, how, and to what extent the new policy

¹ The only significant industrial project in Calabria was the ‘5th national steel complex’ of Gioia Tauro, approved in 1971 and cancelled a few years later [4].

framework established by the EC has changed the way in which the Regional and Local governments of Calabria formulate and implement public policy. Our assessment is based on a thorough review of secondary sources (literature, programming documents, evaluation reports) and about 30 semi-structured interviews to relevant actors involved in the formulation and implementation of the three Calabria ROPs', both public (regional officers, mayors, administrative personnel, consultants) and private (representatives of business associations and unions).

As we shall see, the answer to the above question is not straightforward. On the one hand an important learning process has taken place; on the other several factors have hindered the full deployment of the innovative potential brought about by the ECP.

2 The Evolution of the European Cohesion Policy 2000–2020

To better contextualise our assessment, it is necessary to briefly review the evolution of the *architecture* and *approach* of the ECP over the three programming cycles and how it was translated in the Calabria ROPs.

2.1 The 2000–2006 Programming Cycle

The first ROPs for 'Objective 1' regions (2000–2006) were multi-fund programmes: they had to integrate in a *single* spending programme all three SFs (ESF, EOGAF, and ERDF), they had to be coherent with the ECP objectives and with the NFP-National Framework Programme, and they had to comply with the SF regulations. In Italy, a key coordinating role was played by the Department for Cohesion Policy (DPS), whereby all the Objective 1 ROPs followed quite strictly the NFP and engaged relevant resources on the same 'integrated local development' tool, i.e. the *PITs-Progetti integrati territoriali*.

The first Calabria ROP was formulated and approved in a relatively short time, between 1999 and 2000, i.e. in the last year of a Center-left Regional government coalition. The Department of the Budget was entrusted with the formulation and implementation of the ROP and, as most other Southern regions, drew extensively on *external expertise* (experts hired as DG-Director general or AG-Management authority), in order to afford the complexity and urgency of the task. The formulation process was carried out – as required – in consultation with representatives of regional business associations, unions, and civil society organisations. Once the ROP was approved by the EC in August 2000, a number of administrative reforms were contextually initiated to set up the appropriate regional structures for the management of the programme.

At about the same time the ROP was approved, however, the leadership of the Regional government changed from a Centre-left to a Centre-right coalition and significant changes ensued in appointments and management. These changes interrupted many of the reform processes that had been activated and generated delays in the operationalisation of the ROP. In 2005 the Regional Government changed colour again and the 'closing up' of the – by now quite behind – 2000–2006 ROP fell to a new Centre-left coalition. Administrative changes were hurriedly introduced (especially in what concerned the control system), also in the light of compliance problems detected by the EU, with substantial support from external consulting firms. Spending was accelerated, with

heavy use of so-called ‘coherent projects’, i.e. already completed public works financed outside the ROP and now integrated in order not to lose EU resources [7].

2.2 The 2007–2013 Programming Cycle

In the new programming round the overall design of the ECP changed significantly [8]. ‘Objective 1’ regions became ‘Convergence’ regions. The integration of all SFs in one single programme was abandoned and the ERDF and ESF resources were now to be managed through distinct ROPs, while the Agricultural fund exited the ECP and was to be programmed separately, a change that translated into a proliferation of programming processes and documents. A «strategic turn» also occurred [8], whereby the EU control lessened in the formulation phase, but tightened in the control and reporting phase. The CSFs was replaced by a looser National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF).

In Italy, central coordination of the ROPs was still ensured by the DPS, but greater freedom was given to Regions in what concerned the articulation of the ROP and the allocation of resources, thereby leading to a significant regional differentiation, especially in what concerned the use of ‘integrated local development’ tools.

The formulation of the Southern ROPs took longer this time and they were approved by the EC at the end of 2008, i.e. two years into the programming cycle. Their implementation was subsequently disrupted by the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis, which created difficulties in co-financing and expanding administrative personnel. In 2012, to redress the relevant delays observed in spending, a significant portion of ECP resources was re-centralised through the Action and Cohesion Plan.

In Calabria, the formulation, approval, and operationalisation of the new 2007–2013 ROP-ERDF occurred at the hands of a Centre-left Regional government coalition. The ‘Integrated local development’ tool was radically modified with the introduction of the *PISL-Progetti integrati di sviluppo locale*, which moved from a redistributive to a competitive approach [6]. But the actual implementation of the programmes was carried out by a Centre-right government elected in 2010. Once again, the latter introduced changes in the management structure, which, together with the co-financing difficulties and the freeze on administrative personnel, determined delays. When new regional elections were called in 2014, the pendulum moved back once again, and the closing of the ROP fell to a Center-left Regional government coalition, which, again, had to rush spending and make extensive use of ‘coherent projects’ [9].

2.3 The 2014–2020 Programming Cycle

In this cycle, the architecture of the ECP changed again. The EU re-tightened its control over priorities and objectives, enforcing the ‘competitiveness’ and the ‘public-private’ partnership principles. The NSRF-National Strategic Reference Framework was substituted by a Partnership Agreements and the ROPs were all to pursue three priorities – smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth – articulated in 11 ‘Thematic objectives’, among which a specific one was dedicated to a ‘Better public administration’. Former ‘Convergence’ regions were now named ‘Less developed’ and could choose whether to formulate a single or separate ROPs for the ERDF and FSE. Ex ante conditionalities and result-oriented indicators were also introduced. In what concerned ‘Integrated local

development' the 'place-based' approach was confirmed, which in the new cycle took the name of *ITI-Investimenti territoriali integrati* (Integrated territorial investment). In Italy, the coordination of the new programming cycle was entrusted to a new Agency for Territorial Cohesion, directly under the control of the Central government. At the same time, a new national programme was launched – the *SNAI-Strategia nazionale aree interne* – aimed at improving the level of access to public services by 'inland areas', also with a place-based approach.

In Calabria, the new ROP was formulated by a Centre-left government coalition, which remained in charge until the end of 2019, i.e. for the largest part of its implementation. Consultations started in 2014 and a single ROP, coupled with a Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3), was approved in 2016, once again two years already into the programming cycle. The S3 identified 8 innovation areas, including 'Tourism and culture', 'Agro-industry', 'Sustainable buildings' and 'Logistics'. The ITI tool was also adopted in the context of a regional version of the SNAI, but was later abandoned. The 'final rush' in spending and reporting fell this time onto a Centre-right coalition, elected in 2020 [10].

3 The Impact of the Regionalised ECP as an 'Agent of Change'

Extensive evaluation studies have been carried out on the impact of the 'regionalised' ECP, especially for the 2000–2006 and 2007–2013 rounds, whereas for the 2014–2020 only intermediate reports are yet available [11] [12, 13]. Many such reports have focussed on the relation between policy implementation and «administrative capacity» [14, 15]. The latter factor has gained centre stage in policy debates over the last fifteen years and many studies have now stressed how «institutions matter» in explaining policy implementation and effectiveness, especially when policy is decentralised [16, 17].

On the other hand, a few studies have investigated the inverse relationship, i.e. whether the ECP has contributed to change subnational institutions and improve their administrative capacity, especially through 'Technical assistance' measures [18, 19]. According to such studies, the ECP has had a relevant transformative impact on national and regional policy making, especially in less developed regions, acting as a veritable «agent of change» [18]. This transformative effect, however, has been different across regions, depending on a number of factors: the amount of EU resources relative to national resources; the institutional relations between national and subnational governments; the public policy culture and administrative capacity of subnational governments. From the innovative impact point of view, particularly relevant are in our opinion the 'integrated local development' programmes and tools, envisaged to promote new bottom-up governance and place-based development strategies.

3.1 Institutional Change in Calabria

In what follows, we present elements from our evaluation of the impact of the last three ROPs in the region of Calabria, focussing on the *institutional* sphere, i.e. on the transformative impact the 'regionalised' ECP has had on the *culture*, the *administrative structure*, and the *practices* of policy making. The key question we ask is to what extent

and how the ‘regionalised’ ECP has contributed to change the way public policy is formulated, managed, and implemented in Calabria, in the direction of a better ‘quality of government’, i.e. a process more transparent and accountable, more democratic, and more oriented to the collective good, as in the intentions of the EC.

The cultural dimension. This dimension relates to what has been called the «cognitive sphere» [20] or «mind set» [18] – i.e. the way politicians, civil servants, professionals, entrepreneurs, representatives of labour and civil society organisations ‘think’ about public intervention, policy making, economic development, and the associated themes, concepts, values. According to all of our interviewees, the regionalisation of the ECP has had in Calabria *a very strong innovative impact, triggering an important cultural turn*. A widespread learning process has taken place, both within the public administration and among private actors, with the acquisition of new concepts (environmental sustainability, social inclusion, collective good, innovation, competitiveness), new approaches (public-private partnerships, collaborative practices, local governance, transparency), and also new ‘technical’ knowledge, i.e. concerning EU regulations, programming and reporting procedures, project management techniques. Last, but not least, the ECP has contributed to diffuse a sense of European identity among local communities and actors. Especially the ‘integrated local development’ tools have triggered even in the remotest places a sense of belonging to a wider community.

In this cultural turn, an important role was played by Formez, a historical national agency providing training and technical assistance to Southern Italy, which was involved in supporting administrative capacity building and negotiated practices with Technical Assistance resources.

The management/administrative dimension. In addition to the above cultural turn, the regionalisation of the ECP has had a profound impact also on the management structures of the Calabria regional administration, at least where EU resources were concerned. In order to formulate and implement the ROPs according to EU regulations, a reorganisation was needed of its internal structures, procedures, and regulations. First, the new programming apparatus had to be created from scratch, initially as a ‘Service’ within the Budget Department, and later as a self-standing Department. Subsequently, new functional units had to be established, new chains of command had to be defined, personnel had to be appointed. As stated by one DG, the first ROP 2000–2006 was a full «shock» for the Regional government of Calabria: in the span of few years, they had to approve new regulation and establish new functions: from the Management Operational Structure (SOG) to the Regional Evaluation unit (NRVIP), from the Audit unit, to the Surveillance committee, the Control task force, etc. Moreover, the ROPs specifically required a communication strategy, which involved setting up a website, diffusing information about the ROPs, and accelerating the digital transition.

This reorganisation was indeed carried out, although it was not linear and is still ongoing. Many of the functions and operational units initially established have undergone changes, others were hurriedly instituted or powered when external audits highlighted inadequacies or lack of compliance with EU regulation. Many were restructured in function of the managing philosophy of the political coalition in charge. A case in point is the Regional Evaluation unit (NRVIP-Nucleo regionale di valutazione e verifica degli investimenti pubblici), which underwent several changes over the years. Another

function subjected to repeated changes is the control of financed projects ('1st and 2nd level' control). Here the reorganisation has systematically occurred in 'emergency' mode (i.e. in the final reporting years of the ROPs), resorting to external national or international consulting firms (Ernst & Young, KPMG, Deloitte) and to short-term external personnel. Here too, the Foromez has played an important role, providing training services and technical support to the regional administration.

The relational dimension. This is the sphere where the 'regionalised' ECP has had, perhaps, the most significant impact. The strong emphasis placed on multilevel policy making, administrative decentralisation, and local governance, especially in what concerns the formulation and implementation of 'integrated local development' strategies, involved radical changes in the consolidated hierarchical system of political and administrative relations. These have occurred both *vertically*, i.e. between the Regional and the Local governments, by providing a greater negotiating room to municipalities, and *horizontally*, i.e. between public and private actors, with the involvement of representatives from businesses, unions and the civil society in the policy making process.

Indeed, the ECP requirement of negotiating processes and partnership agreements has triggered in Calabria a very rich season of collective discussion and engagement, especially in the first two cycles. Calabrian actors – regional officers, mayors, civil servants, professionals, entrepreneurs, unions, civil society organisations – «learned to talk to each other» and to try out strategies and projects aimed at the broader collective good, rather than the narrow interest of the individual municipality or business. A key 'resonance' space were the meetings and negotiating tables set up in the context of the 'integrated local development' programmes, which thereby contributed also to the cultural turn described earlier. In a region where there is traditionally little trust and a weak propensity to cooperate with others, developing collaborative relations among mayors and with the private sector was no small feat. In many places, although not consistently over time, relational networks have indeed developed [6].

3.2 Hindering Factors

However, both the interviews and an in-depth analysis of the Final execution reports of the three ROPs [7, 9, 10] reveal the persistence of a number of barriers, that have hindered the full transformative potential of the above-described learning process.

The adoption model. In their evaluation of the ECP as an 'agent of change' across the EU, Polverari et al. [18] make a distinction between places that have implemented a «passive» adaptation, i.e. have unimaginatively conformed their practices to the new ECP rules and requirements, often simply replicating EU guidelines, and places that were capable of «proactively» appropriating the EU policy philosophy, i.e. have «learned» to creatively re-elaborate and contextualise the ECP guidelines, with an «entrepreneurial» approach. In our opinion, the way the Calabria Regional government has carried out the transformations required by the regionalised ECP belongs to the «passive» adaptation type of learning process. We will add that such a passive adaptation has occurred by replication and repetitive addition rather than synthesis and/or integration, which has contributed also to a high degree of *redundancy* in the overall apparatus.

External vs in-house expertise. The complexity of the new management machine – and the novelty of some of the new tasks – required the quick mobilisation of advanced

technical knowledge and administrative skills that were not readily available in the existing regional administration. To face the challenge, the Regional government of Calabria – as was done by many other regions – made extensive use of *external expertise* throughout the three ROPs. It not only appointed free-lance individual experts to perform top management roles in the programming process (DGs and MAs), but it also heavily relied on consulting firms and short-term personnel – financed with ‘Technical Assistance’ resources – to carry out key functions, such as compliance controls, certification and internal audit, monitoring and reporting, all required to pass EU audits. The need to resort to external expertise, was actually aggravated by the freeze on public employment, which intensified after the 2008 global financial crisis.

This means that a large component of the new knowledge and skills activated in the course of the ROPs implementation was not ‘internalised’. The practice of outsourcing relevant tasks – especially those related to control and certification – to different consulting firms and/or ‘ad hoc’ short term teams prevented the consolidation of ‘in-house’ knowledge.

The «silo» effect. Another problem that emerged from the interviews is that the institutional innovations introduced to implement the ROPs have remained confined to the management of the ECP. The learning process and management innovations triggered by the ROPs have been characterised by the so-called «*silo» effect* [18], i.e. have occurred mainly in the Service/Department of Programming – and only to a limited extent in the other Departments involved, such as Transportation or Agriculture – and have not spread to the overall regional administrative structure.

The tension between politics and programming. Another problem is the mismatch between programming cycles and political cycles. In addition to the general *temporal* mismatch (programming cycles = 7 years + n; political cycles = generally 5 years), this problem has proved particularly acute in Calabria, where – since 2000 – the Regional government has experienced a consistent *alternance of political colour*, systematically shifting from a centre-right coalition to a centre-left one, and back.

Thus, although the contents of the ROPs were not affected in a relevant way (as stated by many interviewees, «the approved ROP cannot be easily changed» except for revisions negotiated with the EC), every change in government determined changes in appointments (councillors, DGs, MAs), some reorganisation of the management structure, and even the reformulation of tools and procedures (e.g. public calls and selection criteria). These changes often occurred in ‘critical’ moments of the programming cycle, thereby creating discontinuities and slowing down the implementation process.

The limited political return of cooperative practices. Also related to the tension between politics and programming is the limited political return of cooperative practices. As stressed by Russo [21], the Calabria political model is historically characterised by lack of trust, a limited propensity to cooperate, and particularistic-clientelistic relations among actors. In order to change this model, the new ‘rules of the game’ introduced by the ECP would have to provide visible and quick returns to the actors involved, either in terms of political recognition (for Mayors) or in terms of reduced ‘transaction costs’ (for firms) [21]. In Calabria, these returns have not materialised. Negotiated collective strategies take time (often beyond a Mayor’s political term) and do not provide clear political visibility. In electoral terms, the political return of promoting integrated local

development strategies is thus lower than supporting single micro-projects, more quickly implemented and more easily politically appropriated. We will add that the complexity of negotiated processes has in many cases increased (the perception of) transaction costs, discouraging private actors' engagement in collaborative practices.

The 'parabola' of integrated local development programmes. The evolution of the 'Integrated local development' in Calabria is a perfect illustration of all these hindering factors. In this region the tool was systematically modified over the three ROPs. In the 2000–2006 ROP the approach was of a 'redistributive' nature and covered the whole regional territory: the aggregation of municipalities constituting the *PITs-Progetti integrati territoriali* (Integrated Territorial Projects) was based on functional principles, 'rationally' defined top-down, albeit negotiated with local actors, and all PITs received an initial endowment of resources. In the 2007–2013 ROP, the approach changed radically, as with the *PISLs-Progetti integrati di sviluppo locale* (Integrated Projects for Local Development), the aggregation of municipalities became 'elective', flexible, and did not necessarily require territorial contiguity. Moreover, access to resources was conditional on the presentation of a project and a selection procedure. The overall framework of the tool was rather articulated (7 types of PISLs) and very complex (the first PISLs were formalised only in 2011). In the 2014–2020 ROP, the approach and aggregation of municipalities changed again. The *ITIs-Investimenti territoriali integrati* (Territorially Integrated Investment) concerned new, different, and less numerous aggregations of municipalities, basically limited to inland areas as identified by the SNAI (National Strategy for Inland Areas). Because of political pressures from excluded municipalities the overall tool was eventually cancelled.

Despite its discontinuities and eventual demise, from the point of view of triggering new relations and dialogue among local actors, the transformative impact of the 'Integrated local development' tools in Calabria was extraordinary. All interviewees confirmed that the negotiation tables organised to work out strategies and projects elicited a very strong participation from both public and private partners and triggered important innovations in policy making culture and practices. This mobilisation started in the first ROP, culminated in the second, but then died in the third. As such, its evolution can be described as a 'parabola'.

4 Concluding Remarks

In the perspective of the ECP as an «agent» of change, i.e. its capacity to trigger cultural and institutional innovation in policy making and governance practices in less developed regions, our analysis of the implementation of three ROPs in Calabria definitely highlights the start of an important learning process, characterised by a significant cultural turn, relevant institutional reforms, and new relations among actors. However, the process seems to have waned over time and has stopped short of producing durable and widespread effects. Moreover, it seems to have entered a 'bureaucratisation' phase, whereby formal compliance to the ECP framework is prevailing over engagement and innovation. Based on our analysis, the main weaknesses of the Calabrian adoption of the new policy framework and approach can be summarised as follow.

In the first place the adoption model has been in Calabria one of «passive» adaptation, by replication and addition rather than creative reinterpretation and integration.

Secondly, the transformative impact of the ECP has remained mostly confined to the ROP management apparatus, with limited spill-over effects on the rest of the Regional administration. Thirdly, the continuous evolution of the policy regulatory framework, together with the consistent recourse to external expertise, have hindered the consolidation and maturation of in-house expertise and administrative capacity, negatively affecting the learning curve. Fourth, the Regional government has never truly relinquished its central control over resources, while collaborative processes at the local level have yielded little visible political returns.

There are signs – and also a diffused perception among interviewed actors – that the innovative ebb triggered by the ECP has abated and the ROP is becoming a mere bureaucratic exercise – and an overly complex one at that – to simply redistribute resources among local governments.

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