

Exploring Cultural Ecosystem Services of inner areas to improve community-based approach

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In the context of growing socio-territorial inequalities, inner areas can be understood as the outcome of a hierarchical center-periphery development model, which has produced marginalised territories characterised by economic disadvantages, infrastructural deficiencies, and limited access to essential services, closely linked to issues of accessibility and distance from main urban centres. These conditions foster depopulation and social rarefaction, affecting the capacity of territories to sustain integrated territorial development pathways.

In this scenario, inner areas should not be interpreted solely through categories of marginality and fragility, but as complex territorial systems, where material and immaterial dimensions structure relationships between local communities and territories. However, public policies continue to operate through sectoral approaches, showing limitations in addressing relational, perceptual, and cultural dimensions.

Within this framework, the PRIN RE-PLACE (REframing PLace-based Approach through the Cultural Ecosystem services of inner areas) project proposes a place-based reinterpretation of inner areas through Cultural Ecosystem Services (CES). This approach investigates the system of values connecting local communities and territories, including immaterial dimensions, social practices, and identity-building processes. CES therefore assume a critical role in relation to the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), whose action, although necessary, remains largely focused on essential services, proving structurally insufficient to interpret and govern community-territory relationships.

This contribution presents findings from a qualitative and participatory investigation conducted in representative Italian inner areas, with reference to Gennargentu-Mandrolisai (Sardinia). The analysis explores factors influencing processes of local permanence (“*restanza*”), highlighting not only conditions of disadvantage, but also practices and relationships that support the permanence and reactivation of local communities and territories, with the aim of strengthening territorial development policies.