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**PhD Thesis**

**QUALITY OF LIFE IN INNER AREAS. A MULTI-METHOD AND  
CAPABILITIES-BASED ANALYSIS: EVIDENCE FROM BASILICATA REGION**

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## **PREFACE**

This doctoral dissertation is situated within the broader scientific and policy-oriented debate on quality of life in fragile territories, with particular reference to Italian inner areas. In a context marked by profound demographic, socio-economic, and institutional transformations, these territories today represent a critical nexus for reflecting on territorial inequalities, effective access to citizenship rights, and the prospects for sustainable and place-based development. The research is grounded in the awareness that inner areas cannot be interpreted solely through indicators of deficit or marginality, but rather require analytical tools capable of capturing their complexity, latent resources, and specific configurations of well-being.

Within this framework, the dissertation adopts a multidimensional approach to quality of life, based on the integration of theoretical perspectives, empirical evidence, and different levels of analysis. The reference to the Capabilities Approach makes it possible to move beyond reductionist interpretations of well-being by placing at the center the real opportunities people have to lead the lives they have reason to value, while recognizing the structuring role of territory as a conversion factor that transforms resources into concrete possibilities. This theoretical choice is particularly pertinent for the study of inner areas, where distance from essential services, infrastructural conditions, and institutional dynamics directly affect the exercise of substantive freedoms.

From a methodological standpoint, the study is characterized by a multi-method and sequential research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative tools and fostering a dialogue between institutional perspectives and individual lived experiences. The joint consideration of the perceptions of local administrators and those of residents responds to the need to reconstruct quality of life as a socially and territorially constructed phenomenon, avoiding both purely top-down approaches and exclusively subjective readings. The Basilicata region, entirely classified as an inner area, is adopted as a privileged empirical context, as it is representative of the tensions between structural fragilities and environmental, social, and cultural potentials that characterize many of the country's peripheral areas.

The research was developed within an institutional and programmatic context strongly oriented toward the strengthening of applied research and the support of ecological, digital, and social transitions. In particular, this study was carried out within the Agritech National Research Center and was funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU under the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.4 (Directorial Decree No. 1032 of 17/06/2022; Project code CN00000022). The analyses and interpretations presented in this dissertation reflect solely the views and opinions of the author(s); neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be held responsible for the content expressed herein.

With regard to data management, the study was conducted in compliance with confidentiality constraints related to the project's funding and the protection of research participants. The data collected are subject to limitations that prevent their public dissemination in individual and non-anonymized form. For these reasons, only processed and aggregated data can be made available. Synthetic or statistically aggregated datasets used for the analyses may be provided upon reasonable special request.

Overall, this dissertation aims to contribute to the scientific debate on quality of life in peripheral territories by offering a contextual, theoretically grounded, and methodologically integrated reading of inner areas, with the objective of providing insights that are useful both for the advancement of academic reflection and for the design of public policies that are more equitable and sensitive to territorial specificities.

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## THESIS OUTLINE

In recent decades, Italian inner areas have been the subject of increasing scientific and political interest. These territories are characterized by fragile demographic dynamics, limited access to essential services, and socio-economic opportunities that are often reduced compared to urban and peri-urban areas. Concurrently, these regions safeguard environmental, cultural, and relational resources that represent a significant, yet largely unexplored, potential for sustainable and place-based development strategies. Within this framework, the quality of life (QoL) of inhabitants in inner areas emerges as a crucial dimension for understanding not only territorial disparities but also the prospects for socio-economic regeneration in these contexts.

Despite the growing attention toward inner areas, quality of life in these territories remains a relatively under-researched field, particularly through approaches capable of systematically integrating objective and subjective dimensions, institutional perspectives and individual lived experiences, and qualitative and quantitative tools. Specifically, the literature reveals a lack of studies that jointly consider the viewpoints of both residents and local administrators—the actors who, at different levels, experience and govern the transformation processes of peripheral territories on a daily basis. Furthermore, many international contributions continue to rely predominantly on standardized indicators, which struggle to capture the real freedoms of individuals to lead the lives they value, especially in contexts characterized by spatial and institutional marginality.

In light of these limitations, this thesis adopts the Capabilities Approach, developed by Amartya Sen and subsequently expanded by Martha Nussbaum, as the theoretical framework for interpreting quality of life in inner areas. This approach allows for a shift beyond purely economic metrics and narrow subjective evaluations by centering the analysis on the effective opportunities individuals have to be and to do what they value in their existence. Inner areas are particularly well-suited to a capabilities-based analysis, as individuals' real opportunities in these contexts are heavily influenced by the infrastructure, social, environmental, and institutional factors that intertwine within the local space.

The thesis is structured into three empirical investigations conducted in Basilicata, a region predominantly classified as an inner area and therefore highly representative of the tensions between marginality and potential. The research follows a sequential logic. An initial exploratory phase (Study 1) analyzes the perceptions of local administrators to identify the factors deemed central to quality of life in inner territories. These findings inform the subsequent modelling stage (Study 2), in which a quantitative model based on Nussbaum's capabilities is constructed to measure the quality of life as perceived by residents. Finally, the research adopts an interpretative lens (Study 3) through the

application of Q Methodology to mayors, aiming to map the various narratives and configurations of meaning associated with local development.

Against this background, the research aims to answer the following questions:

- *RQ1*. Which dimensions, according to local administrators, define the quality of life in inner areas?
- *RQ2*. How can these dimensions be translated into an empirical model based on the Capabilities Approach?
- *RQ3*. Which capabilities are most strongly associated with the residents' perceived QoL?
- *RQ4*. What visions of QoL characterize mayors of inner areas, and how do they differ from one another?
- *RQ5*. To what extent do institutional perspectives and those of residents converge or diverge?
- *RQ6*. What implications emerge for the understanding of QoL and for territorial development policies?

The thesis opens with a theoretical framework on quality of life in inner areas, followed by the three empirical studies, each characterized by a specific methodology and a distinct level of analysis. Finally, the results are integrated to discuss their theoretical and policy implications.

The original contribution of this thesis lies in the integrated analysis of quality of life in inner areas through a multi-method research design that combines institutional perspectives and individual experiences, articulating different levels of analysis progressively. In particular, the work contributes to the literature in three main directions. First, it proposes a contextual and place-based reading of quality of life by exploratively reconstructing the dimensions of well-being relevant to inner territories based on the perceptions of local administrators, without presupposing a predetermined theoretical schema. Second, building on these findings and the Capabilities Approach framework, it develops an empirical measurement model of quality of life founded on capabilities, adapted to the specificities of inner areas and applied to residents' perceptions. Third, it facilitates a dialogue between residents' evaluations and the institutional narratives of local administrators, highlighting convergences and ruptures in the construction of the meaning of well-being and territorial development. In doing so, the thesis contributes both to the theoretical debate on multidimensional and territorially situated well-being and to the reflection on place-based policies for peripheral territories.

## **PART I – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH CONTEXT**

### **Chapter 1 – The territorial dimension of quality of life: definitions, metrics, and the case study**

#### *Abstract*

This chapter frames quality of life as a multidimensional and territorially embedded concept, reconstructing its evolution from utilitarian and income-based approaches to contemporary “beyond GDP” perspectives. It highlights the central role of space in shaping well-being, emphasizing how territorial inequalities influence access to rights, opportunities, and life chances beyond economic conditions alone. Within this framework, the Capabilities Approach developed by Amartya Sen and further articulated by Martha Nussbaum is adopted as the main theoretical reference, as it focuses on substantive freedoms and on the conversion factors through which territories enable or constrain human flourishing. The chapter further examines the rural paradigm and clarifies the conceptual distinction between rurality and innerness, interpreted as functional distance from essential services. Finally, Basilicata is introduced as an emblematic case study and empirical laboratory for the analysis of quality of life in Italian inner areas.

## **1 The evolution of the concept of quality of life: from utilitarian origins to a multidimensional perspective**

Contemporary reflection on the quality of life is rooted in a fundamental and ancient question: what does it mean to "live well," and how can this be measured? Although this theme spans the entire history of philosophy, one of the first systematic attempts at quantifying well-being is attributed to the philosopher, jurist, and economist Jeremy Bentham, who in 1789 developed the famous felicific calculus. Within this utilitarian perspective, Bentham proposed evaluating human well-being as an algebraic sum of pleasures and pains, measurable through criteria such as intensity, duration, certainty, and fecundity. Despite its relative simplicity, Bentham's framework represents a pivotal turning point: it formalized the idea that well-being could be analyzed using rational, predominantly economic instruments. This inaugurated a paradigm that interprets quality of life primarily as a phenomenon measurable in terms of aggregate utility, grounded in the logic that public policy should be directed toward the maximization of collective happiness (Bentham, 1789/2015).

However, the specific term "quality of life" emerged significantly later. It was only in the 1960s, within the context of American social sciences, that the awareness grew that economic development is not synonymous tout court with well-being (Di Franco, 1989). This phase marked the first genuine shift from a strictly economic perspective toward a social conception of well-being. As early as the late 1950s, with the U.S. President's Commission on National Goals (1960) established during the Eisenhower presidency, and subsequently within the context of the John F. Kennedy (1961–1963) and Lyndon B. Johnson (1963–1969) administrations, systematic references began to emerge regarding dimensions of well-being that were irreducible to income alone, such as the environment, public services, and safety.

During the 1970s, this orientation was progressively consolidated at a theoretical level. A crucial milestone occurred in 1974 with the so-called "Easterlin Paradox," which demonstrated that, beyond a certain threshold, an increase in average income does not translate into a corresponding rise in self-reported happiness, thereby questioning the capacity of GDP to serve as a proxy for overall well-being (Easterlin, 1974). Within this same intellectual and scientific milieu, the contributions of authors such as Storrs McCall (1975) helped to more explicitly theorize quality of life as a multidimensional concept encompassing social, environmental, and relational factors.

Following these reflections, the concept was solidified in the 1970s by seminal works such as *The Quality of American Life* (1976) by Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers. In this pioneering study, quality of life is defined as the result of the interplay between objective conditions (what people "have") and subjective evaluations (how they interpret and judge their own existence). This represented a decisive transition: from well-being as a material condition to well-being as a lived

experience, which increasingly depends on social, psychological, and emotional dimensions. It was during this period that the fundamental analytical distinction between two types of indicators crystallized. *Objective indicators* are measures based on empirically observable and verifiable data, derived from statistical surveys, administrative records, or quantitative analyses of the material conditions in which individuals live. They describe structural and contextual aspects of well-being—such as resource availability, access to services, environmental quality, or infrastructure—and allow for the evaluation of dimensions that do not depend on individual perceptions but on external conditions that are measurable and comparable across time and space. *Subjective indicators*, by contrast, are based on the evaluations individuals express regarding their own lives and capture aspects not immediately observable from the outside, such as satisfaction levels, perceived well-being, lived emotions, and the personal interpretation of one’s existential conditions. These measures reflect the experiential dimension of well-being and make it possible to understand how individuals translate objective conditions into judgments about their own state, revealing psychological, motivational, and value-based aspects that objective indicators are unable to detect.

Simultaneously, within the field of psychology, the paradigm of subjective well-being emerged, led by Ed Diener (1984). According to this approach, living well depends on an individual's capacity to perceive their life as fulfilling on both a cognitive level (general satisfaction) and an affective level (the balance between positive and negative emotions). This recognizes that well-being is a lived experience that may diverge from economic conditions: affluent contexts may generate stress, while more modest circumstances may yield high levels of satisfaction (Diener, 1984).

In the 1990s, the search for new indicators became more structured. In 1990, the UNDP introduced the Human Development Index (HDI), conceived by Mahbub ul Haq and developed within the framework of the first Human Development Report, based on Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach. The index combines indicators of income, longevity, and education, marking a transition from the centrality of economic growth to the evaluation of development as the expansion of human opportunities (UNDP, 1990). This further reinforced the shift toward a multidimensional vision of well-being. A few years later, the Scandinavian sociologist Erik Allardt (1993) proposed the "Having, Loving, Being" model. According to Allardt, quality of life is an interplay of three dimensions: the possession of material resources (Having), the ability to build meaningful social relationships (Loving), and personal realization through participation and identity (Being). This vision was consolidated mid-decade by the World Health Organization (WHO). In 1995, the WHO—through the WHOQOL Group—defined quality of life as “an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (WHOQOL Group, 1995). This definition explicitly integrates

subjective and contextual dimensions: QoL is not merely an isolated individual assessment but a situated experience, shaped by values, norms, institutions, and material conditions.

The evolution of quality of life studies reached a turning point at the end of the decade with the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen, who introduced a paradigm shift in the very conceptualization and evaluation of human well-being. Sen's proposal, known as the Capability Approach (1999), constitutes a systematic critique of both utilitarianism and the identification of well-being with income or aggregate economic metrics such as GDP. According to Sen, neither the possession of goods (commodities) nor subjective satisfaction—the core element of utilitarian doctrines—can serve as the evaluative nucleus of well-being. Individual "utilities," Sen observes, are informationally poor and vulnerable to the phenomenon of "adaptive preferences": individuals accustomed to conditions of deprivation may report being satisfied simply because they have lowered their aspirations (Sen, 1984). Income, in turn, is an indicator of the means available, rather than the life outcomes that people actually manage to achieve. Such an approach, in addition to ignoring inequalities, overlooks central aspects such as health, political freedom, education, social relations, autonomy, and security (Sen, 1999).

To operationalize this perspective, Sen distinguishes between *functionings and capabilities*. *Functionings* represent the states of being and doing that characterize the life individuals lead—ranging from being in good health to participating in community life—while *capabilities* designate the set of substantive freedoms an individual possesses to choose between different combinations of functionings. Well-being, therefore, coincides neither with possessed means nor with subjective self-assessment, but with the range of effective opportunities individuals can exercise. In this perspective, the Capability Approach forms a theoretical bridge between objective and subjective dimensions of well-being: it incorporates both material and institutional conditions as well as preferences, aspirations, and the personal agency required to transform resources into real life opportunities (Sen, 1992). A central methodological aspect of Sen's theory is its open and procedural structure. Sen explicitly rejects the idea of defining a fixed and universal list of capabilities, arguing that the determination of relevant freedoms should be the result of democratic processes of public deliberation, which are variable over time and sensitive to context. A pre-established list, Sen argues, would impose specific values and deprive communities of the task of determining which freedoms are most significant for a dignified life (Sen, 2009).

In summary, Sen provides a theoretical framework capable of transcending both the economic and subjectivist reductionism of well-being. His multidimensional conception, attentive to real freedoms, institutional arrangements, and social conditions, has exerted a decisive influence on how quality of life is interpreted and measured today, contributing significantly to the definition of the contemporary

paradigm of human well-being. Within this framework, the work of Martha Nussbaum (2011) serves as an applicative complement: while sharing the theoretical premises of the approach, Nussbaum proposes a more normative and institutional formulation, offering a constitutional basis for well-being by identifying a set of "central capabilities." Since this perspective will be explored in depth in subsequent chapters, it suffices here to emphasize that Nussbaum's contribution allows for a more direct application of the Senian approach to public policy and fundamental rights, without altering the procedural nature of the original model (Nussbaum, 2011).

Building on the foundational premises of the Capabilities Approach, Nussbaum (2000; 2011) advances a normative extension of the framework by identifying a set of ten central human capabilities regarded as essential prerequisites for a dignified and fully human life. Unlike Sen's approach, capabilities are here conceived as plural, autonomous, and non-substitutable dimensions of well-being, each contributing in a specific way to human flourishing. In this study, Nussbaum's framework of central capabilities is adopted as the analytical reference for the construction of the empirical model used to assess quality of life in rural and inland areas.

The first capability, Life, concerns the possibility of living a life of normal length, without exposure to premature death or conditions that would undermine the value of life itself. It implies the guarantee of safety, health, and protection from avoidable risks and constitutes a foundational capability, since its deprivation nullifies the exercise of all others (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020; Witte, 2020).

The capability Bodily Health includes the right to enjoy good physical and mental health, adequate nutrition, access to healthcare services, and safe housing conditions. It goes beyond the mere absence of illness and refers to a level of well-being that enables individuals to lead active and fully functioning lives (Tengland, 2020).

The capability Bodily Integrity concerns the protection of physical integrity from violence, abuse, and coercion, as well as freedom of movement and choice in affective and reproductive relationships. It includes the ability to move freely, travel, and live in safety, without fear of aggression or discrimination (Stewart, 2013).

The capability Senses, Imagination, and Thought refers to the ability to freely use the senses, imagination, and critical thought, supported by access to education, culture, and freedoms of expression and belief. It entails the possibility of receiving a high-quality education capable of fostering creativity, independent judgement, and a conscious understanding of the world (Talbot, 2025).

The capability Emotions relates to the capacity to develop and nurture meaningful emotional bonds with other people, animals, and the natural environment. It entails the ability to experience emotions

such as love, gratitude, and compassion, without emotional development being compromised by fear, abuse, or insecurity, and presupposes relationships grounded in trust, respect, and mutual recognition (Shinn, 2015).

The capability Practical Reason concerns the ability to reflect critically on one's way of life, to form a conception of the good, and to orient one's choices according to freely adopted values and principles. It implies moral autonomy, freedom of thought and conscience, and the possibility of actively participating in shaping one's own life projects (Robeyns, 2016).

The capability Affiliation comprises two closely related dimensions. The first concerns the ability to live with and for others, recognising shared humanity, developing empathy and solidarity, and engaging in meaningful social relationships while enjoying respect and dignity as persons of equal worth. The second dimension relates to the ability to participate actively in social and political life, exercising civil and political rights, cooperating with others on an equal basis, and contributing to collective decision-making processes. Affiliation thus implies not only freedoms of association and expression, but also the absence of discrimination and barriers that hinder full social inclusion and recognition (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020; Robeyns, 2016).

The capability Other Species concerns the ability to live in a conscious and respectful relationship with nature and other living beings, recognising their intrinsic value. It entails care for ecosystems, animals, and plants, as well as the capacity to establish a balanced relationship between human needs and environmental protection (Stewart, 2013).

The capability Play encompasses the ability to engage in rest, play, recreational and cultural activities, and to experience pleasure and lightness in everyday life. It acknowledges that a fully human life cannot be entirely absorbed by productive activities, but requires spaces for leisure and enjoyment (Robeyns, 2016).

Finally, the capability Control over One's Environment is articulated into two dimensions. The political dimension concerns the effective ability to participate in decisions that affect one's life, to exercise freedoms of association, expression, and vote, and to be recognised as a citizen endowed with equal dignity and voice within public institutions. The material dimension, in turn, refers to the ability to own property, access employment and productive resources on a basis of equality and non-discrimination, and to exercise effective control over the material conditions of one's existence, thereby living with autonomy and security and without dependence on structural poverty or precariousness (Robeyns & Byskov, 2020).

A central element of Nussbaum's approach is the concept of a capabilities threshold, which identifies a minimum level of development for each fundamental capability, below which a life cannot be considered dignified (Nussbaum, 2011). Unlike Sen's open-ended framework, Nussbaum's model

provides a normative benchmark that can be translated into operational tools for policy analysis and evaluation, making it particularly suitable for the empirical measurement of quality of life. This approach allows ethical, social, and institutional dimensions to be coherently integrated within a unified analytical structure.

In recent years, the Capabilities Approach in Nussbaum's formulation has attracted growing interest in the international quality-of-life literature, generating numerous attempts at empirical application. However, these contributions display considerable heterogeneity in terms of completeness, territorial scale, and degree of operationalisation. Some studies have applied the framework in urban or sector-specific contexts, such as Talu's (2009) model for evaluating public policies targeting children, or the OCAP-18 questionnaire developed by Lorgelly et al. (2015) in the health domain, which relies on a subset of capabilities. Other contributions, such as Biagi et al. (2018), have pursued a more comprehensive application of the ten capabilities but remained confined to urban contexts without specific adaptation to rural areas. Studies conducted in Italy, including Casini et al. (2021) on the inland areas of Tuscany, have adopted simplified models for reasons of empirical feasibility, sometimes relying on dimensional reductions (e.g., two-capabilities schemes; see Desai, 1995), while applications such as that by Mäki-Opas et al. (2022) have focused on specific population groups without systematically accounting for territorial dimensions.

Taken together, these studies highlight both the potential and the limitations of empirical applications of the Capabilities Approach. Most existing contributions remain partial, sector-specific, or strongly urban-centred, often simplifying the theoretical framework to fit pre-existing data collection instruments and overlooking the interaction between material conditions, individual agency, and territorial specificities in rural contexts.

The new millennium marks the institutionalization of theories on multidimensional well-being. The report of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission (2009) established the necessity of moving "beyond GDP," asserting that economic growth alone is insufficient to describe a society's progress. It argued that indicators must also encompass environmental and intergenerational sustainability—specifically, the capacity to ensure present well-being without compromising that of future generations. This principle, explicitly articulated in the report (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi, 2009, chaps. 2 and 3), has become a cornerstone of modern well-being metrics. Following this trajectory, the OECD has, since 2011, developed the *How's Life? – Measuring Well-Being* framework—a system of multidimensional indicators designed to evaluate material living conditions, quality of life, and resources for future well-being—alongside the Better Life Index, introduced that same year as a comparative and communicative tool. Both initiatives are part of the OECD's *Better Life Initiative*, which adopts the recommendations of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission and has consolidated a

person-centered approach to progress over time. In recent years, and particularly in the most recent editions of *How's Life?* (up to 2024), the OECD has progressively strengthened its focus on inequalities, environmental sustainability, subjective well-being, and societal resilience, confirming the shift from purely economic measurement to an integrated, long-term evaluation of well-being. In Italy, the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) and the National Council for Economics and Labour (CNEL) launched the *Benessere Equo e Sostenibile* (BES — Equitable and Sustainable Well-being) project in 2010, aiming to measure progress not only in economic terms but in light of social, environmental, and territorial equity dimensions (ISTAT & CNEL, 2013).

The original structure of the BES, adopted in the early editions of the Report (2013–2017), was organized into 12 domains—including health, education, work and life-balance, subjective well-being, social relations, environment, and service quality. Each domain comprised both objective and subjective indicators designed to reflect the plurality of aspects contributing to quality of life. This architecture operationally translates the theoretical legacy of previous decades: the multidimensionality of well-being, the relevance of subjective perceptions, the importance of capabilities effectively exercisable by individuals, and the necessity of addressing territorial inequalities.

A crucial institutional milestone occurred with Law No. 163/2016, which explicitly integrated the BES into the State budget process. Four BES indicators must now be presented annually in the Update Note to the Economic and Financial Document (NADEF) and in the Budget Law, accompanied by an assessment of the expected effects of public policies. For the first time, well-being formally entered national economic programming, signalling a move beyond the idea that GDP alone can represent a country's progress. Through this transition, the "beyond GDP" approach has become an integral part of the policy cycle, aligning with international literature which highlights that economic measures alone are insufficient to capture quality of life.

Since 2021, ISTAT has updated the conceptual framework of the BES, increasing the domains from 12 to 15. This reorganization introduced new areas—such as equal opportunities, culture and leisure, and the well-being of minors—to better reflect societal shifts and the emerging needs of the population (ISTAT, 2023; 2024). This expansion responds to the growing demand for indicators capable of capturing the relational, cultural, demographic, and institutional factors influencing well-being in contemporary societies. The integration of the BES into the institutional framework represents a concrete application of the "beyond GDP" transition: it is no longer merely a theoretical critique of the inadequacy of traditional economic data, but a practical commitment to a set of information that guides policies across multiple fronts of social life, recognizing that well-being is multidimensional, situated, and dependent on material, relational, and perceived conditions.

The vast heterogeneity of theoretical and disciplinary contributions has thus led to the progressive establishment of an *integrated paradigm*. In light of this evolution, quality of life is today defined as an extremely complex and dynamic concept that varies across time and space according to the historical period, the evaluative framework, and the reference society (Pontin et al., 2013). It is now firmly established as a multidimensional reality used to assess the state of people's lives by involving economic, social, cultural, political, and ecological aspects (Casini et al., 2021). QoL is no longer conceived as a simple sum of objective conditions or as a purely subjective perception of well-being, but as a complex construct formed by the continuous interaction between subjects, contexts, and institutions. The notion of well-being thus shifts from the idea of "having" to the idea of "being and doing"—that is, to the set of opportunities an individual has to lead a life they consider meaningful.

This paradigm coherently integrates three fundamental dimensions. The first concerns material conditions, which remain an indispensable element: income, accessibility to services, infrastructure, employment opportunities, and environmental quality. The second dimension encompasses the subjective sphere, comprising life satisfaction, perceived safety, interpersonal trust, emotions, expectations, and the perceived sense of control over one's existence. The third dimension, introduced forcefully by the Capabilities Approach, concerns substantive freedoms—the effective power of individuals to choose and realize their own life projects, independent of material conditions or subjective perceptions alone.

Quality of life thus emerges as the outcome of a dynamic process in which individuals interpret their context, assign meaning to it, and mobilize resources. This process is deeply influenced by the territory: places are not merely backdrops, but active agents that shape possibilities and constraints. It is precisely this territorial perspective that makes the integrated paradigm particularly relevant for the analysis of fragile territories.

## **2 The spatial dimension of well-being**

If moving beyond GDP has highlighted the need to reconsider *what* is measured, the “spatial turn” in the social sciences makes it equally urgent to consider *where* measurement takes place. This shift is crucial because the risk of overgeneralization concerns not only economic indicators but also contemporary multidimensional metrics. Aggregate averages at the national or regional level tend to conceal deep territorial heterogeneities, producing a picture that often fails to reflect citizens' lived experiences. A regional average—such as one referring to the quality of health or education services—may flatten the profound divide between urban service hubs and the fragmented settlement patterns of small municipalities.

The literature on spatial inequality shows that *spatially blind* policies—those that are insensitive to place—are unable to recognize these differences and tend to treat all citizens as if they lived under identical spatial conditions (McCann & Rodríguez-Pose, 2011). Ignoring local granularity leads to distorted analyses, because the territorial dimension—understood as the fine-grained distribution of services, physical accessibility, and distance from decision-making centers—directly intervenes in the production of inequalities (Harvey, 2005; Storper, 2013). It is therefore no coincidence that the OECD reports *How's Life in Your Region?* (2014) showed that the most significant disparities often occur not between different countries, but within the same country, among contiguous territories endowed with very different opportunity structures (OECD, 2014).

From this perspective, territory ceases to be a mere passive “container” of economic and social activities and becomes an active agent—a fundamental determinant of individual and collective well-being. Over the past two decades, the geography of well-being has emerged as an interdisciplinary field combining economic geography, human development studies, and behavioral economics, highlighting how well-being is intrinsically spatialized. Building on the pioneering contributions of scholars such as Gesler (1992) and Andrews (2003), this body of research has demonstrated that living in a specific place strongly conditions life chances—from employment prospects to perceived health and subjective happiness. Studies such as those by Ballas (2013) have advanced a “spatial” view of happiness, empirically confirming that the geography of well-being does not necessarily coincide with that of economic development: relatively poor regions may display high levels of subjective well-being due to environmental and relational factors, while economically productive areas may exhibit low levels of quality of life (Ballas & Tranmer, 2011; Easterlin et al., 2010).

This link between space and opportunity connects particularly well with Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach. What a person can effectively “be and do” depends not only on individual resources but also on *conversion factors*—that is, the environmental, institutional, and social conditions that transform resources into real opportunities. Territory functions in all respects as a conversion factor: holding a university degree (a resource) in a large city with a dynamic productive ecosystem generates very different opportunities compared to holding the same degree in an inner area lacking infrastructure and services. In the latter case, the capability to exercise one’s skills is effectively constrained (Robeyns, 2005). Although the specific application of this model—and in particular Martha Nussbaum’s approach—will be examined in greater methodological detail in subsequent chapters, it is essential here to establish the theoretical principle: the local context operates as a *capabilities-shaping environment*, an environment that enables or constrains the exercise of human possibilities (Neutens, 2015).

To understand why territories, generate such markedly different levels of well-being, the concept of *territorial capital*, developed by Roberto Camagni (2008), is central. According to this framework, each place possesses a unique combination of material, immaterial, institutional, and cultural resources. Within this theoretical perspective, wellbeing geography has progressively incorporated the role of the natural environment: already in the previous decade, concepts such as *wellbeing landscapes* and green spaces were identified as territorial amplifiers of well-being and mental health (Kytta et al., 2016).

However, it is the literature published after 2020, in the post-COVID-19 period, that has radicalized this perspective, showing how socio-economic transformations and the impacts of the pandemic have shifted environmental endowments from being mere aesthetic resources to becoming structural determinants of spatial inequalities (Swapan et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2023). Recent studies demonstrate that green infrastructure and urban parks have become strong determinants of mental health, particularly within vulnerable communities, in both the pandemic and post-pandemic contexts (Astell-Burt & Feng, 2021; Li et al., 2022; Ugolini et al., 2021).

The impact of territory on well-being does not end with the availability of green infrastructure alone but is deeply intertwined with community dynamics. Indeed, the relational dimension emerges strongly in research on social capital and place attachment. Pitas and Ehmer (2020) show that, during the pandemic, territories with higher levels of social capital exhibited greater psychological resilience and a stronger capacity to mobilize collective resources. Similarly, Maricchiolo et al. (2021) and Albers et al. (2021) demonstrate that attachment to place reinforces perceptions of well-being even in economically fragile contexts, suggesting that territorial well-being is a phenomenon richer than material well-being alone.

However, the failure to valorize territorial capital in marginalized areas generates consequences that extend beyond individual distress, feeding into a political geography of discontent. Recent literature has explored the nexus between territorial inequalities and democratic stability: according to Martin et al. (2021), post-crisis territorial polarization has intensified disparities in opportunities for social mobility, while studies such as those by Stroppe (2023), McKay et al. (2024), and Olivas Osuna et al. (2021) show that distrust in institutions is strongly correlated with perceptions of *territorial abandonment*—that is, the widespread feeling, especially in peripheral or “left-behind” areas, of having been neglected by public policies and national governance. These studies empirically confirm Rodríguez-Pose’s (2018) earlier insights on “places that don’t matter”: territorial inequalities do not produce only material effects, but also fuel growing political malaise.

It is precisely on the basis of this evidence—which shows how space generates inequalities not only socio-economically but also civically and democratically—that wellbeing geography has

increasingly engaged in dialogue with the paradigm of *spatial justice*. If territorial disparities affect participation, institutional trust, and the very quality of democracy, then well-being can no longer be treated as a purely economic issue. From this perspective, scholars such as Davoudi and Brooks (2021) argue that territorial equity and well-being have become inseparable concepts. The analysis of well-being thus shifts from the strictly economic domain to the ethical-political one (Soja, 2010): ensuring an equitable spatial distribution of opportunities becomes an imperative to guarantee that citizenship rights are not geolocated—that is, made contingent upon one’s residential postcode.

In light of this evidence, the need for radically place-based public policies emerges with particular force. A growing body of recent studies—especially those focusing on the post-pandemic period—demonstrates that uniform (*one-size-fits-all*) or spatially neutral strategies are ineffective, if not regressive, in addressing widening regional divergences, as they overlook local systems of relationships, identities, and territorial capital (McCann, 2023; Garcilazo & McCann, 2025; Churski et al., 2025; OECD, 2025; PSNAI, 2025). This empirically confirms what had previously been theorized by Fabrizio Barca (2009): only policies designed around the specificities of local contexts—capable of addressing structural constraints while enhancing distinctive local assets—can activate the latent potential of territories. This approach provides the necessary theoretical foundation for analyzing, in the following sections, the specific dynamics of rural and inner areas, where the challenge of well-being hinges precisely on the capacity to convert local resources into concrete life opportunities.

### **3 The rural paradigm: definitions, classifications, and transformations**

The term *rural* is intrinsically polysemic and elusive: in geographical and sociological scholarship it has long been described as an “unstable” category, whose meaning shifts according to historical, cultural, and political contexts (Woods, 2010). Many quantitative approaches have traditionally defined it negatively—*rural* as what is not urban—thereby relegating it to a residual category, that is, to “whatever remains” once urban areas have been delineated (Halfacree, 1993; Woods, 2010).

Against this backdrop, the main international statistical institutions have adopted operational definitions of rurality based primarily on population density. The OECD (2019) defines rural areas as local communities with a density below 150 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> at the municipal (local) level, a threshold used as the basis for distinguishing between predominantly urban, intermediate, and predominantly rural regions (OECD, 2019). The European Union, through Eurostat, has developed the Urban–Rural Typology and the classification known as the Degree of Urbanisation (DEGURBA), based on population grids with a 1 km<sup>2</sup> resolution (Eurostat, 2018; European Union, 2017). This

method first identifies *urban centres* (high-density clusters with at least 1,500 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> and a total population of at least 50,000) and *urban clusters* (medium-density clusters with at least 300 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> and 5,000 inhabitants), defining as rural those cells located outside these agglomerations (Eurostat, 2018). On the basis of these criteria, and in accordance with the common classification system of territorial units for statistics—NUTS (European Union, 2003)—NUTS3 regions are ultimately classified as predominantly urban, intermediate, or predominantly rural according to the share of the population living in rural cells (Eurostat, 2024; Dijkstra & Poelman, 2014).

These approaches have the advantage of ensuring international comparability and access to a wide range of socio-economic data (Copus et al., 2020; OECD, 2019), but they also present significant limitations. Density thresholds, when applied uniformly, tend to portray rural areas as homogeneous and “empty” spaces, underestimating the profound heterogeneity of the countryside (Dax & Fischer, 2018; Woods, 2010): between a highly industrialized irrigated plain and a depopulated mountain valley—both classified as “rural” according to the grids—there exist enormous structural differences (Barca et al., 2014; De Rossi, 2018). As debates on the definition of rurality have shown, a purely descriptive dimension—based solely on density and land use—fails to adequately capture the socio-cultural and relational dimensions of rural places, as well as the diverse development trajectories that characterize them (Halfacree, 2006; Woods, 2010).

Historically, the rural has also been almost synonymous with the agricultural. For much of the twentieth century, the productive structure of rural areas was largely identified with the primary sector and with a Fordist model of agricultural modernization, based on increasing productivity, mechanization, and integration into agro-industrial markets (Marsden et al., 1993; van der Ploeg, 2008). From the 1980s and 1990s onward, however, European countries experienced a gradual process of de-agrarianization of rural economies, accompanied by a growing diversification of the productive and functional activities of rural territories (Halfacree, 2006; Woods, 2011; OECD, 2006). Agriculture now accounts for an ever-smaller share of employment and value added, while manufacturing activities, services, and tourism have gained increasing importance (OECD, 2006; OECD, 2016).

Within this context, the rural development literature has elaborated the concept of multifunctionality as a key term of the new paradigm. Van der Ploeg and Roep (2003) interpret multifunctionality as a response to the agricultural modernization paradigm: farms and rural territories no longer produce food commodities alone, but simultaneously generate a plurality of goods and services—landscapes, environmental quality, biodiversity, typical products, social services, and tourism—through strategies of *broadening*, *deepening*, and *regrounding* of farm

activities. This process gives rise to the figure of the “new peasant,” who combines food production with agritourism, educational farms, direct sales, care services, and landscape management, thereby constructing *nested markets* and forms of endogenous development rooted in local resources (van der Ploeg, 2008; van der Ploeg et al., 2012).

This paradigm shift finds explicit formalization in the OECD report *The New Rural Paradigm: Policies and Governance* (2006), which represents a turning point also for public policy. According to the OECD, the “old” rural paradigm was based on sectoral, agriculture-centred policies, predominantly redistributive in nature and oriented toward supporting farmers’ incomes through subsidies and transfers, often disconnected from territorial specificities. By contrast, the New Rural Paradigm proposes shifting the focus from *sectors* to *places*, adopting an integrated territorial approach in which the object of intervention is the entire local rural system. This implies, on the one hand, prioritizing investments—in material and immaterial infrastructure, human capital, innovation, services, tourism, and the valorization of environmental and cultural resources—over subsidies; on the other, recognizing the diversity of rural areas and their often-underutilized potential, and promoting forms of multi-level governance and partnerships between public and private actors (OECD, 2006). The goal is no longer merely to compensate for the “disadvantage” of poorer areas, but to mobilize and enhance local assets—natural, cultural, and relational—within a place-based development logic.

However, the uncritical application of these international definitions to the Italian context reveals clear limitations. Italy is characterized by a polycentric settlement structure and a complex morphology, in which many territories that are formally “rural” due to low population density are in fact places rich in history, cultural heritage, and civic identity, markedly different from the large extensive agricultural areas that informed OECD models (Servillo et al., 2016).

To grasp the specificity of these territories—which often combine cultural richness with severe deficits in accessibility—the traditional rural paradigm has proved insufficient. In the national context, it has therefore been necessary to integrate the morphological reading with a functional one, based not on population density or land use, but on distance from essential citizenship services. From this perspective emerges the definition of Inner Areas, which will be examined in greater detail in the following section.

#### **4 The Specificity of Inner Areas**

Italian Inner Areas today represent a central node in the contemporary debate on territorial development, social cohesion, and quality of life. The conceptual turning point in the definition of

these territories was marked by the *National Strategy for Inner Areas* (Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne, SNAI), launched in 2014 by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, which introduced an innovative perspective that moved beyond traditional classifications. Unlike international definitions (Brezzi et al., 2011 in OECD Publishing; Fadic et al., 2019 in OECD Publishing; Eurostat, 2011, 2018, 2024), generally based on morphological criteria, population density, or the prevalence of agricultural activities, the SNAI interprets marginality not as a static geographical condition but as the outcome of differential accessibility to essential citizenship services, placing at the center of analysis the relationship between space, rights, and opportunities (Barca et al., 2014).

According to the SNAI methodology, the unit of analysis shifts from density to functionality. A municipality is defined as a *Pole* (or service provision center) if it simultaneously meets three fundamental requirements: a complete upper secondary education offer, a hospital equipped with a Level I Emergency Department (DEA), and a railway station classified at least as Silver, Gold, or Platinum. Territories that do not meet these criteria are classified according to the travel time required to reach the nearest Pole, and are distinguished into belt areas, intermediate areas, peripheral areas, and ultra-peripheral areas. *Inner Areas* proper correspond to the latter three categories (intermediate, peripheral, and ultra-peripheral), that is, those territories that exceed a critical threshold of functional distance from centers providing essential services, with increasing travel times—approximately 20 minutes for intermediate areas, over 40 minutes for peripheral areas, and more than 75 minutes in the case of ultra-peripheral areas (ISTAT, 2022).

This classification has made it possible to dismantle the conceptual automatism between “inner area” and “rural area.” Rurality, in the consolidated definitions discussed above, concerns land use and population density; internality concerns functional distance from services. Consequently, a territory may be rural yet well connected (and therefore not inner), while a medium-sized mountain town may be classified as inner despite lacking an agricultural vocation (Bertolini & Pagliacci, 2017). This distinction is crucial for correctly interpreting processes of territorial marginalization (Bertolini & Pagliacci, 2017; Lucatelli & Monaco, 2018): while rurality is a morphological category, internality is a functional one. It describes places where the formal equality of rights clashes with a substantive inequality of access, measurable in the additional time required to reach fundamental services.

The difference between the two concepts can be summarized as follows:

**Table 1.** *Rural area vs. Inner area*

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Main criterion</b>	<b>Sources</b>	<b>Focus</b>
<b>Rural area</b>	Population density, land use, economic structure	OECD (2006)	Focus on agriculture, primary activities, landscape, community
<b>Inner area</b>	Access to essential services (education, healthcare, mobility, etc.)	SNAI (Barca et al., 2014)	Focus on citizenship rights and real opportunities (capabilities)

In quantitative terms, according to the ISTAT reclassification (2022), inner areas cover approximately 59–60% of the national land area and encompass more than half of all Italian municipalities, despite hosting less than a quarter of the total population. These territories are frequently characterized by demographic and economic fragility, marked by depopulation, aging, and poorly diversified production systems—dynamics confirmed by numerous recent analyses on peripherization and the demographic transformations of the south Italy, also called “*Mezzogiorno*” (Martins & Davino, 2023). Alongside these fragilities, inner areas safeguard environmental, cultural, and landscape resources of considerable value. It is precisely this dual nature—situated between vulnerability and potential—that makes these territories a privileged observatory for scientific research and for the formulation of place-based policies. In this regard, academic literature confirms that variables such as accessibility to services, local governance, and economic structure are decisive factors in the production of territorial inequalities (Bertolini & Pagliacci, 2017; Ferry & McMaster, 2018). Simultaneously, some research highlights the role of local communities as a factor of resilience and a driver of social innovation, emphasizing that inner territories are not merely remote spaces but dynamic contexts capable of developing alternative development models, facilitated by local cooperation practices and deep cultural roots (Gkartzios et al., 2022; Mantino, 2022).

From this perspective, inner areas represent a particularly significant case for the application of the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). The distance from essential services does not merely represent a condition of physical isolation; it constitutes a constraint on individuals' substantive freedoms, limiting their capacity to access meaningful life opportunities. This explains the growing interest in multidimensional analyses of quality of life, particularly in regions such as Basilicata, which is entirely classified as an "inner area" and is thus emblematically representative of the tensions between marginality and potential.

These critical issues, far from being confined to a merely theoretical or local debate, have stimulated political and institutional recognition of the specificities of inner areas within a multi-level

programmatic framework. At the European level, the long-term vision for rural areas (European Commission, 2021) identifies four strategic pillars—making areas stronger, connected, resilient, and prosperous—recognizing these territories as fundamental to the ecological and digital transitions. Cohesion policy 2021–2027, through instruments such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), supports a place-based approach aimed at reducing internal disparities by promoting investments in connectivity, public services, and the strengthening of administrative capacity (European Union, 2021; Böhme et al., 2022; Ferry & McMaster, 2018).

In Italy, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR – Italian Government, 2021) directly intersects with the objectives of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), financing interventions aimed at village regeneration, the development of telemedicine, digitalization, and the improvement of sustainable mobility in peripheral areas. This convergence of policy frameworks illustrates how the country’s recovery necessarily depends on the recomposition of the territorial fractures that characterize inner areas.

In conclusion, inner areas are no longer regarded as residual spaces or territories destined for decline, but as places endowed with a crucial transformative potential. The current challenge lies in turning the tension between accessibility and equity into a new development model, in which the richness of social and environmental capital can become a strategic lever to ensure not merely the survival of communities, but a genuine quality of life, firmly rooted in the opportunities that people are effectively able to access and exercise.

## **5 Determinants of quality of life in “fragile” territories**

The analysis conducted thus far has shown that well-being is not an abstract concept, but a situated experience, deeply shaped by territorial characteristics and by the socio-economic and environmental conditions in which people live. In the literature, quality of life is therefore understood as the intersection of material and subjective dimensions, acknowledging that the territorial context—whether urban or rural—modulates experiences of satisfaction and personal fulfillment beyond standard economic indicators alone (Knies & Hopkins, 2025). However, when attention shifts to inner and fragile areas, the quality-of-life equation becomes more complex: it is not the simple sum of indicators, but rather the outcome of a dynamic tension between structural deficits (what is lacking) and latent resources (what persists).

The evolution of the concept of quality of life has found particularly fertile ground in rural studies, which over the past two decades have challenged the traditional “urban-centric” vision of well-being.

Within this strand, the work of Mark Shucksmith and colleagues (2009, 2016, 2018) has played a significant role in overturning representations of rural areas as inherently “underdeveloped” or “deficient.” Shucksmith has shown that differences between urban and rural contexts are not merely quantitative, but conceptual: the well-being of fragile communities cannot be interpreted as a simple shortfall relative to an urban standard, since these communities develop their own configurations of quality of life, shaped by the interaction between social capital, proximity-based relationships, and adaptation to local conditions (Shucksmith et al., 2009; Shucksmith & Brown, 2016; Shucksmith, 2018).

From this perspective, living in an inner area does not merely imply geographic distance from services, but entails being embedded in a context characterized by specific dynamics that may amplify vulnerabilities while also generating unexpected adaptive opportunities.

Among the negative drivers, the most significant is the thinning out of essential services, which gives rise to what the literature defines as a “vicious circle of fragility.” Depopulation reduces the critical mass required to sustain schools, healthcare facilities, and infrastructure; the closure of these services further accelerates outmigration, diminishing territorial attractiveness and weakening social networks. This process translates into genuine deprivations of opportunities and reduced capacities for social and civic participation. Added to this is the digital divide, which today no longer represents merely a technological gap, but a substantive barrier to citizenship. In territories where physical mobility is costly and connectivity infrastructures are inadequate, lack of digital access forecloses opportunities for remote work, telemedicine, and distance learning (Salemink et al., 2017; Jongebloed et al., 2024), undermining fundamental capabilities and widening territorial inequalities in education and economic inclusion.

However, studies such as those by Ballas (2013) have proposed a “spatial” perspective of happiness, demonstrating that well-being levels do not depend solely on individual characteristics but are intimately linked to social contexts and the symbolic quality of places. It is within this framework that positive drivers emerge. The spatial approach highlights that social networks, neighborhood interactions, and a sense of territorial community are crucial determinants of life satisfaction. In inner areas, dense family ties (*bonding social capital*) and a direct relationship with the natural landscape constitute central elements of daily experience (Pugno & Verme, 2012; Silva et al., 2012). In many instances, these intangible factors—such as the perception of safety, the absence of urban congestion, and environmental quality—function as compensatory mechanisms relative to infrastructural shortcomings. This contributes to life satisfaction levels that, in certain contexts, may be comparable to or even higher than those found in urban areas (Sørensen, 2014; Biagi & Meleddu, 2024), thereby fostering community resilience.

To synthesize the main determinants of quality of life in fragile territories identified in the literature, Table 2 distinguishes between factors of a structural nature and those of a relational and environmental nature, illustrating how, in inner areas, quality of life derives from the dynamic interaction between material deficiencies and intangible resources.

**Table 2.** *Summary of determinants of quality of life in inner areas (negative drivers vs positive drivers)*

<b>Negative Drivers (Inner Areas)</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Positive Drivers (Inner Areas)</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Service retrenchment</b>	Closure of schools, hospitals, and essential services due to depopulation	Local social capital	Neighbourhood networks, proximity relations, and community solidarity
<b>Depopulation</b>	Selective out-migration of young people and reduction of the resident population	Sense of belonging	Strong collective identity and attachment to place
<b>Digital divide</b>	Limited access to the internet and digital technologies	Environmental quality	Low congestion, natural landscapes, and environmental health
<b>Geographical isolation</b>	Physical distance from urban centres and mobility constraints	Perceived safety	Low crime rates and stronger informal social control
<b>Limited economic opportunities</b>	Restricted labour markets and low economic diversification	Staying / returning	Active choice to remain in or return to the area as a form of place-based care
<b>Demographic fragility</b>	Population ageing and low birth rates	Community resilience	Capacity for collective adaptation and response to crises

It is essential to emphasize that positive and negative drivers do not operate in a symmetrical or mechanically compensatory manner. The presence of strong community ties or high environmental quality does not automatically offset the effects of service scarcity or geographical isolation; similarly, the mere availability of infrastructure does not guarantee high levels of perceived well-being. Rather,

quality of life in fragile territories emerges as a dynamic—and often unstable—equilibrium between factors of deprivation and factors of resilience. It is precisely within the imbalance of these dimensions that divergent trajectories of well-being are produced, enabling some contexts to sustain satisfying ways of life despite structural deficiencies, while others experience conditions of persistent malaise.

A pivotal concept for understanding this dynamic, particularly relevant to the Italian and Southern context, is that of "*restanza*" (the conscious choice to stay), theorized by the anthropologist Vito Teti (2022). The decision to remain in (or return to) a fragile place is not a passive act of resignation but an active practice of caring for the territory, building relationships, and regenerating a sense of belonging. *Restanza* thus becomes a determinant of quality of life: the possibility of inhabiting one's place of origin is perceived as a value in itself, capable of counterbalancing the material costs of peripherality and challenging narratives that view abandonment as an inevitable destiny (Teti, 2022).

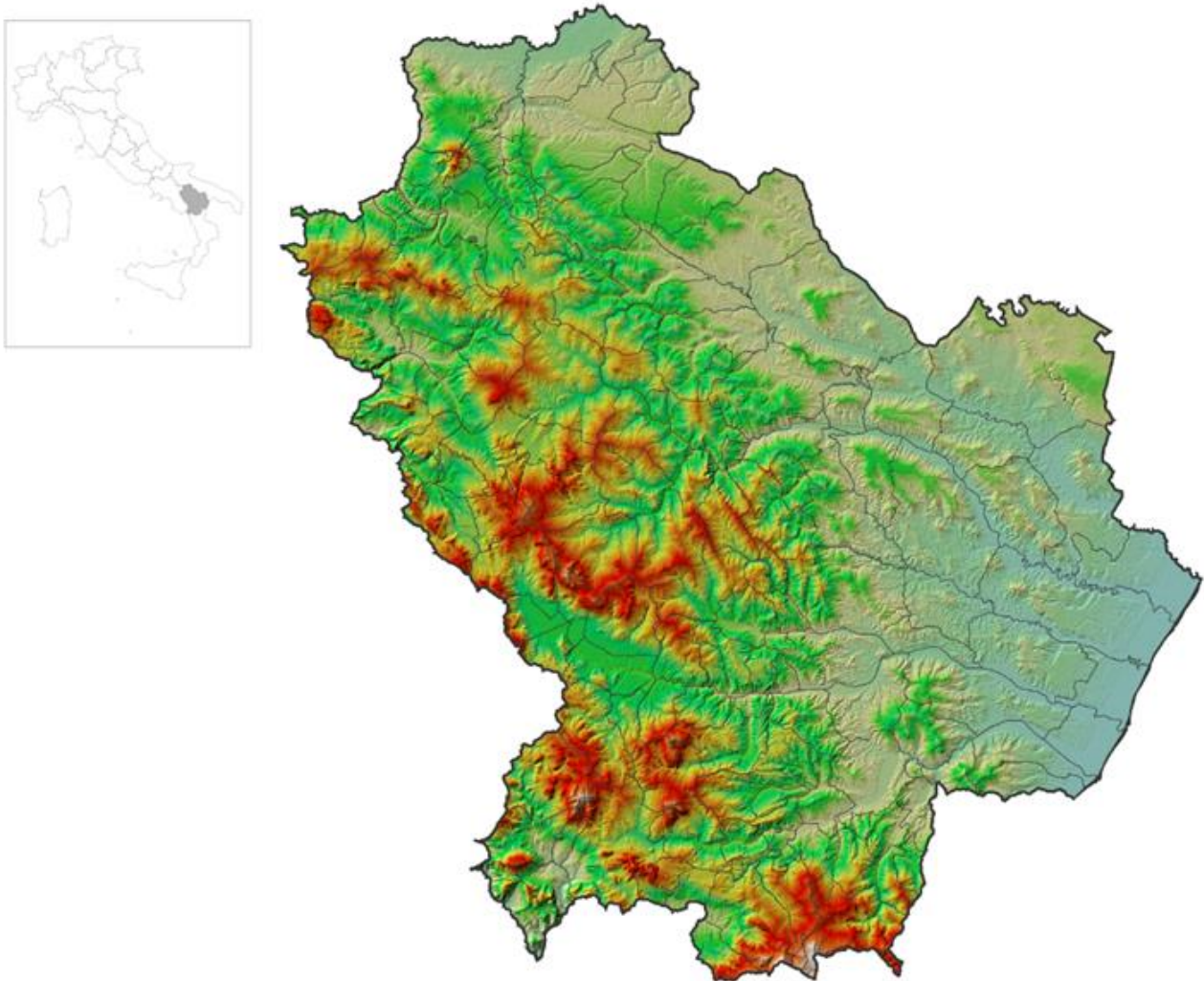
This coexistence of resources and critical issues makes inner areas a privileged laboratory for the study of quality of life. As highlighted by Pugh and Dubois (2021), effective policies in these contexts are not those that attempt to replicate urban models, but rather place-based strategies that capitalize on local identities. Quality of life in fragile territories, therefore, depends on the ability to transform territorial capital—environment, culture, community—into opportunities for sustainable development, breaking isolation through social and digital innovation without depleting the heritage of relationships that constitutes the soul of these places.

It is within this theoretical framework—shaped by the tensions between depopulation and *restanza*, and between isolation and landscape beauty—that the case study of the Basilicata Region is situated. As an archetype of the Italian inner area, its analysis serves as the focus of the empirical section of this research.

## **6 Research context: socio-economic profile of the Basilicata region**

Basilicata represents an emblematic case study, a genuine open-air laboratory for analyzing the dynamics of inner and rural areas in southern Italy. Located in southern Italy, the region covers approximately 10,000 km<sup>2</sup> and hosts a population of around 540,000 inhabitants, with one of the lowest population densities in the country (about 55 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) (ISTAT, 2025). The following figure 1 illustrates the geographical placement of the region.

**Figure 1.** *Geographical location of the Basilicata region in Italy*



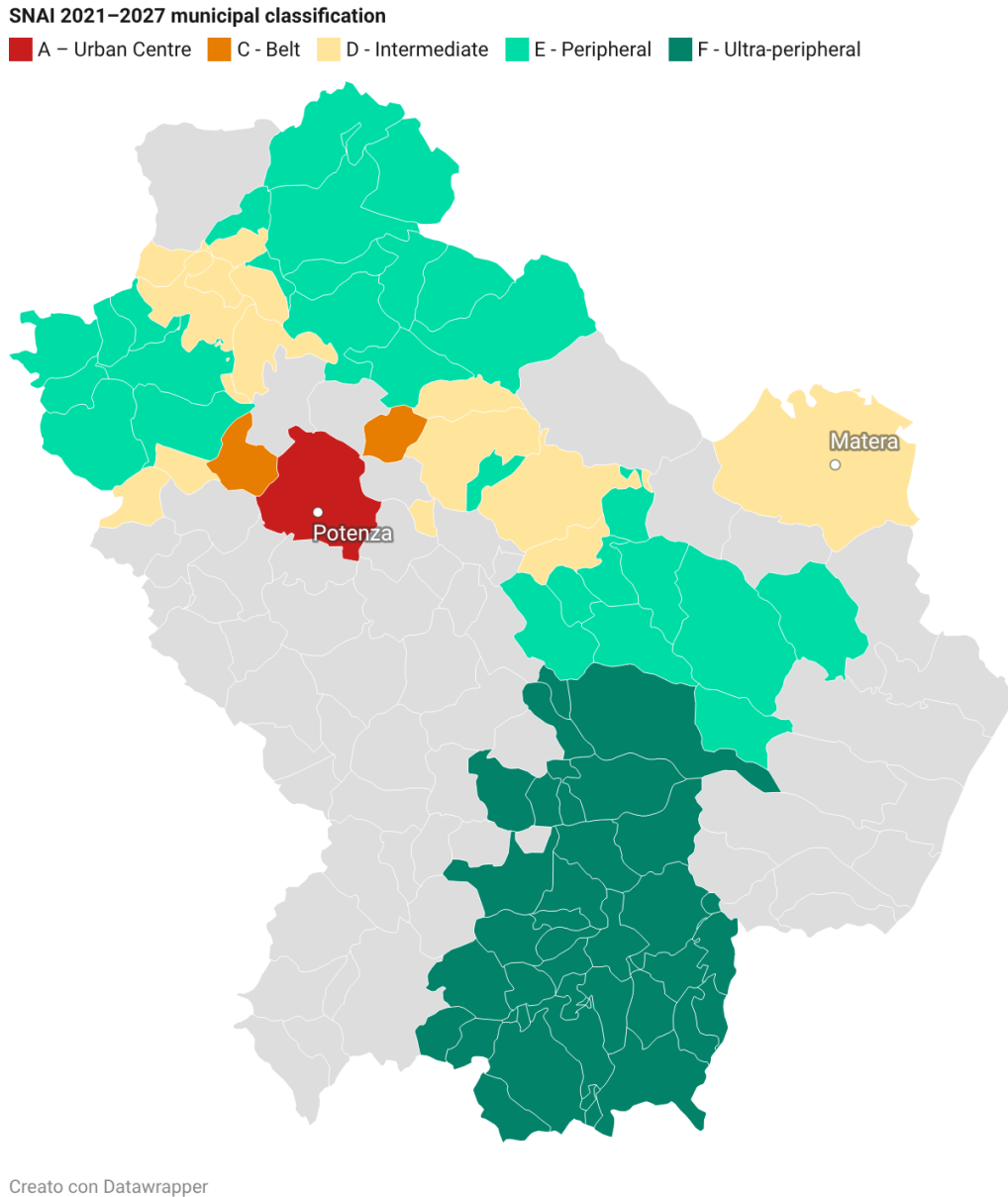
Administratively divided into the two provinces of Potenza and Matera, the region is characterized by a predominantly mountainous and hilly morphology and by a polycentric settlement structure, consisting of a dense network of small municipalities often located far from the main service centers. What makes Basilicata an ideal setting for this investigation is the near-complete overlap between the definitions of “rurality” and “innerness.” From a morphological and productive perspective, the region is classified by the OECD (2011) and Eurostat (2018) as “predominantly rural.” The territory has historically been oriented toward agriculture, which still plays a central role in the regional economy, alongside a natural and landscape heritage of inestimable value (forests, natural parks, biodiversity) and a social structure characterized by strong community cohesion.

From a functional perspective, the application of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) reveals a condition of structural marginality. In Basilicata, this mapping highlights an extremely sparse service infrastructure: Potenza is identified as the region's sole Urban Centre (A), the only hub

capable of ensuring a comprehensive supply of higher-order services. A clear indication of this fragility is provided by the city of Matera: despite its status as a provincial capital and its international prestige, it is functionally classified as an Intermediate Area (D), as it fails to fully meet the minimum accessibility and service provision thresholds established by the National Strategy.

Surrounding the Urban Centre (A) of Potenza are the Belt (C) municipalities, located within a 20-minute travel radius. However, the true spatial identity of the Lucanian territory emerges within the Inner Areas, which encompass the vast majority of the region. Out of a total of 131 municipalities, 72 are situated within the seven project areas (Alto Bradano, Montagna Materana, Marmo Platano, Mercure–Alto Sinni–Val Sarmento, Medio Agri, Medio Basento, and Vulture). Within these areas, the functional classification reveals a gradient of increasing isolation: from Intermediate Areas (D) (between 20 and 40 minutes from the Hub), to areas of extreme criticality, including municipalities classified as Peripheral Areas (E) (between 40 and 75 minutes) and Ultra-peripheral Areas (F) (over 75 minutes from service centres). The spatial distribution of these functional classes is illustrated in the following map.

**Figure 2.** Territorial zoning of Basilicata’s municipalities based on the SNAI 2021-2027 classification. Source: Author’s elaboration based on SNAI 2021-2027 data. Map generated via Datawrapper



The region perfectly epitomizes the 'dual nature' of fragile areas. On the one hand, the ISTAT report “Conti Economici Territoriali 2022–2024” (published in December 2025) reveals a complex and 'two-speed' economic landscape (ISTAT, 2025). During 2024, Basilicata demonstrated higher productive resilience than the national average, recording a 1% growth in real GDP, compared to the 0.7% observed both at the national level and across the rest of the Mezzogiorno (ISTAT, 2025).

Regarding income levels, the Lucanian GDP per capita reached €28,400 in 2024. This figure places the region in a relatively advantageous position within Southern Italy, exceeding the macro-area average (€24,800) with a positive differential of approximately €3,600 per inhabitant (+14.5%). Longitudinal analysis confirms a steady growth trajectory: in 2023, GDP per capita stood at €27,500, representing a nominal increase of €900 (+3.3%) within a single year (ISTAT, 2025).

Nevertheless, this performance remains insufficient to bridge the profound gap with the rest of the country. Given a national average of approximately €37,300, Basilicata records a per capita deficit of about €8,900, positioning itself between 24% and 26% below the Italian mean. In the regional rankings, Basilicata occupies the 16th position, remaining structurally distant not only from the leading areas of the North-West (€46,100) and North-East (€43,600) but also from 'transition' regions such as Marche (€34,100), Umbria (€32,500), and Abruzzo (€32,100) (ISTAT, 2025).

For a comprehensive overview of the national economic landscape, Table 3 presents the GDP per capita for all Italian regions, allowing for a direct comparison with Basilicata region.

**Table 3.** *GDP per capita in Italy by region, 2024 (thousands of euros per inhabitant, current prices).*

*Source: ISTAT 2025, Conti economici territoriali 2022–2024.*

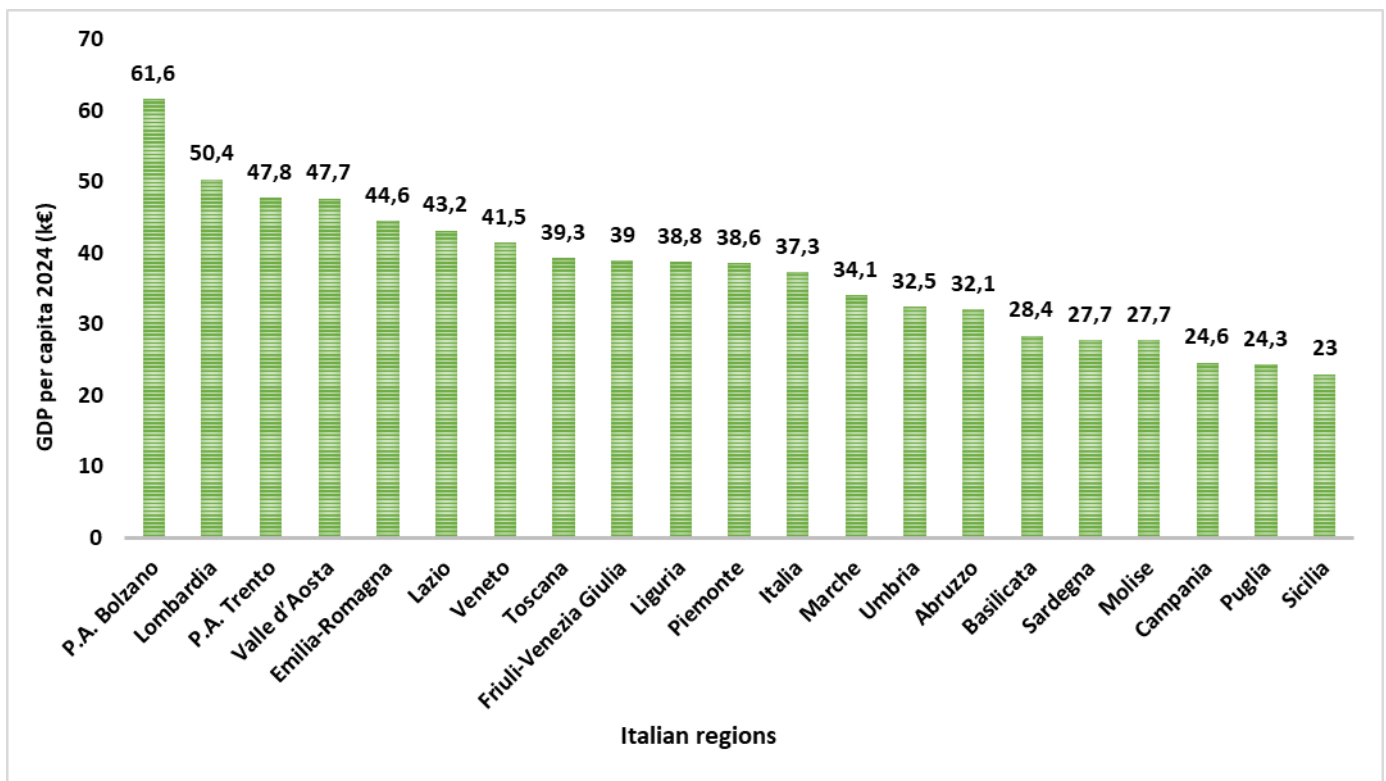
<b>Position</b>	<b>Area</b>	<b>GDP per capita 2024 (k€)</b>
<b>1</b>	P.A. Bolzano	61,6
<b>2</b>	Lombardia	50,4
<b>3</b>	P.A. Trento	47,8
<b>4</b>	Valle d'Aosta	47,7
<b>5</b>	Emilia-Romagna	44,6
<b>6</b>	Lazio	43,2
<b>7</b>	Veneto	41,5
<b>8</b>	Toscana	39,3
<b>9</b>	Friuli-Venezia Giulia	39,0
<b>10</b>	Liguria	38,8
<b>11</b>	Piemonte	38,6
<b>–</b>	<b><u>Italia</u></b>	<b><u>37,3</u></b>
<b>12</b>	Marche	34,1
<b>13</b>	Umbria	32,5
<b>14</b>	Abruzzo	32,1
<b><u>16</u></b>	<b><u>Basilicata</u></b>	<b><u>28,4</u></b>

17	Sardegna	27,7
18	Molise	27,7
19	Campania	24,6
20	Puglia	24,3
21	Sicilia	23

The data presented in Table 3 are visually synthesized in Figure 4, which illustrates the regional hierarchy and highlights the significant economic disparities existing across the Italian territory.

**Figure 3.** Regional GDP per capita in Italy (2024). Values in thousands of euros at current prices.

Source: Author's elaboration based on ISTAT (2025) data



The most critical figure pertains to the direct well-being of the population: despite robust productive capacity, this wealth fails to translate proportionally into household income. In 2024, per capita disposable income in Basilicata grew by only 1.5%—the lowest rate in the South (which averaged 3.4%) and exactly half the national growth rate (3%). This 'decoupling' underscores a structural fragility in wealth distribution, perpetuating the region's state of social disadvantage (ISTAT, 2025).

The socio-economic landscape is further exacerbated by a state of macro-regional infrastructural isolation: Basilicata is not served by high-speed rail lines and lacks operational civilian airports for

passenger traffic, making it one of the few Italian regions entirely excluded from the primary rapid transport networks (Rete Ferroviaria Italiana, 2025; ENAC, 2024). External accessibility relies heavily on infrastructure situated beyond regional borders, such as the airports of Bari-Palese and Naples-Capodichino, entailing extensive travel times and high mobility costs (ISTAT, 2022).

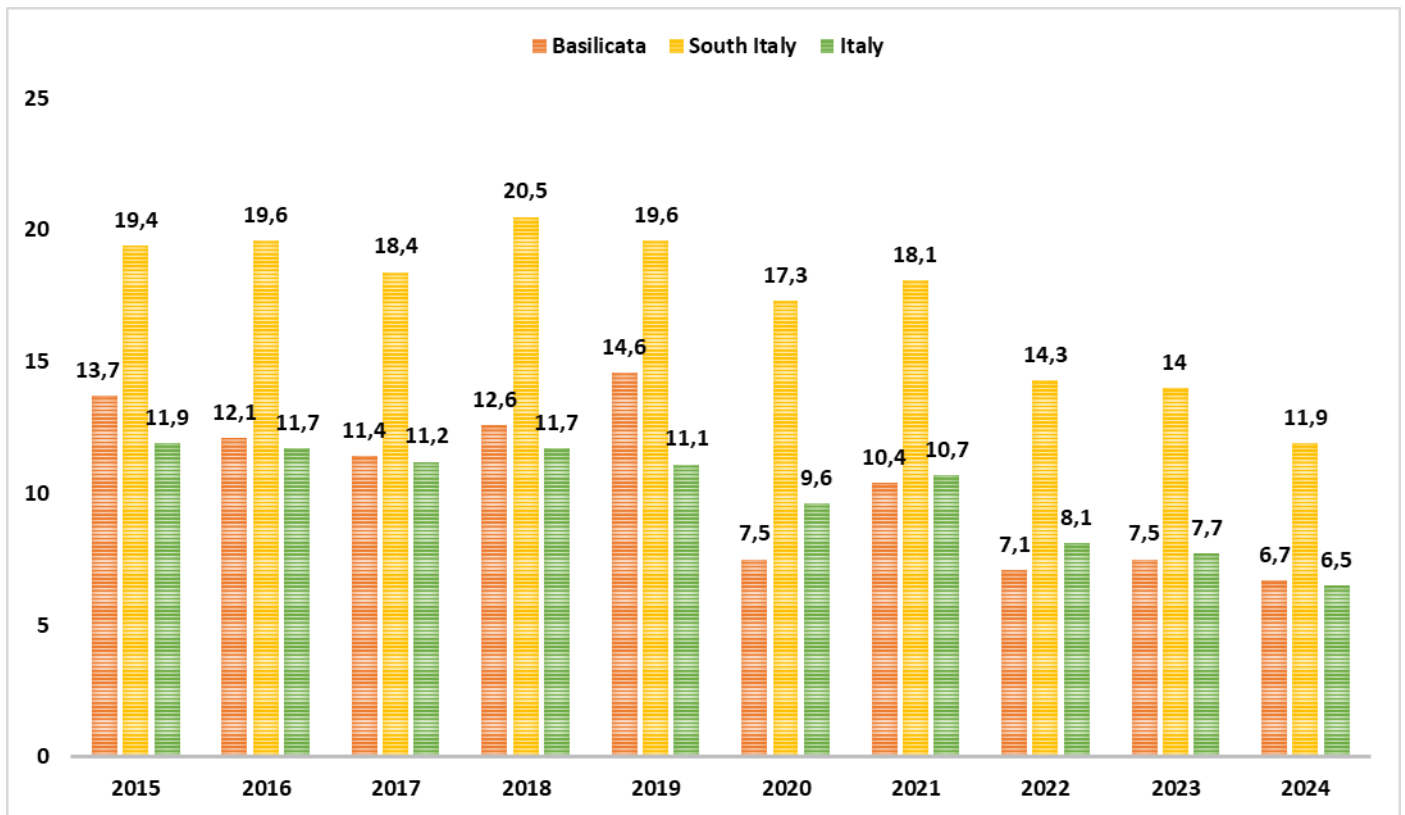
To provide a structured comparison of the region’s economic performance, the following table synthesizes key indicators for Basilicata, the Southern macro-area, and the national average, drawing on the most recent data released at the end of 2025.

**Table 4.** *Comparative economic indicators: Basilicata, Southern Italy, and national average (2024–2025). Source: ISTAT 2025, Conti economici territoriali 2022–2024*

<b>Indicator (Year 2024)</b>	<b>Basilicata</b>	<b>South Italy</b>	<b>Italy (average)</b>	<b>Basilicata/Italy gap</b>
GDP per capita	€ 28.400	€ 24.800	€ 37.300	- 24%
GDP growth 2024	+ 1,0%	+ 0,7%	+ 0,7%	+ 0,3%
Household income growth 2024	+ 1,5%	+ 3,4%	+ 3,0%	- 1,5%
Employment growth 2024	In line with the South	+ 2,2%	+ 1,6%	Positive regional trend
Weight of the Underground economy (2023)	-	16,5%	11,3%	-
Ranking	16th	-	-	Lower-middle range

Regarding the labor market, the analysis of the 2015–2024 decade reveals a significant reduction in unemployment, albeit accompanied by the persistence of territorial imbalances. At the national level, the unemployment rate fell from 11.9% (2015) to 6.5% (2024); in the Mezzogiorno, although remaining at higher levels, it decreased from approximately 19–20% to 11.9% (ISTAT, 2016; 2024). Within this framework, Basilicata exhibits an intermediate and more volatile trend. In 2015, the rate stood at 13.7%; following the fluctuations of the pandemic period, a phase of stability has emerged since 2022, with rates recorded at 7.1% (2022), 7.5% (2023), and 6.7% (2024). These figures position Basilicata below the Southern Italian average and in close proximity to the national mean (ISTAT, 2023; 2024). The longitudinal evolution of the labor market over the 2015–2024 decade is illustrated in Figure 4, which contrasts Basilicata’s unemployment trajectory with the trends observed in Southern Italy and the country as a whole.

**Figure 4.** *Unemployment Rate Trends (2015–2024): Basilicata, Southern Italy, and National Average (%)*. Source: Author’s elaboration based on ISTAT, Labour Force Survey – Annual Data, “The Labour Market – 4th Quarter 2024



However, the Bank of Italy advises interpreting these figures with extreme caution: the relatively low unemployment rate significantly reflects low labor market participation, high levels of inactivity, and negative demographic dynamics—namely depopulation and emigration—which artificially contract the potential labor force (Banca d’Italia, 2025). Furthermore, the region is impacted by the weight of the ‘non-observed economy’ (submerged sectors), which accounts for 16.5% of the total value added in the South Italy (ISTAT, 2025).

Nevertheless, the primary structural challenge facing the region under analysis is the phenomenon of depopulation. Over the last decade, Italy has lost approximately 1.86 million inhabitants (-3.1%) (ISTAT, 2016; 2025), with the Mezzogiorno seeing a decline of nearly 1.2 million people (-5.7%).

In this context, Basilicata represents one of the most critical cases: between 2015 and 2024, the region recorded a population loss of approximately 38,000 residents (-6.7%), a contraction rate exceeding both the national and Southern Italian averages. Demographic dynamics in Basilicata reached a particularly critical juncture in 2024, when the regional population growth rate fell to -6.3 per thousand, ranking among the lowest values recorded in Italy (ISTAT, 2025).

This decline within the Lucanian territory is driven by the convergence of a significantly negative natural balance and net outward migration flows, which particularly affect segments of the population with medium-to-high educational attainment (ISTAT, 2025). Furthermore, the region suffers from a limited capacity to attract international migration flows that could potentially offset the loss of residents. In the Inner Areas, poor accessibility to services fuels a 'vicious cycle': the shrinking population weakens the local economic base and service provision—factors which, in turn, incentivize further emigration (Banca d'Italia, 2025; ISTAT, 2024).

To quantify the extent of the demographic decline discussed, Table 5 provides a detailed breakdown of population loss over the 2015–2024 decade, comparing Basilicata's contraction with the broader trends observed in Southern Italy and at the national level.

**Table 5.** *Quantification of population loss and demographic contraction (2015–2024). Source: ISTAT (2025), "Demographic Indicators (time series 2014–2024)" and "Resident population as of January 1, 2025"*

<b>Area</b>	<b>Population 2015</b>	<b>Population 2024</b>	<b>Absolute variation</b>	<b>Variation %</b>
<b>Italy</b>	~60.795.000	~58.934.000	–1.861.000	–3,1%
<b>South Italy</b>	~20.905.000	~19.708.000	–1.197.000	–5,7%
<b>Basilicata</b>	~571.000	~533.000	–38.000	–6,7%

Economic fragility is reflected in the incidence of relative poverty, defined as the proportion of households with incomes below 60% of the national median. In 2024, the incidence rate among Italian households was 10.9%, while in Southern Italy, this figure reached 20%. In Basilicata, the relative household poverty rate stood at 13.6% in 2024.

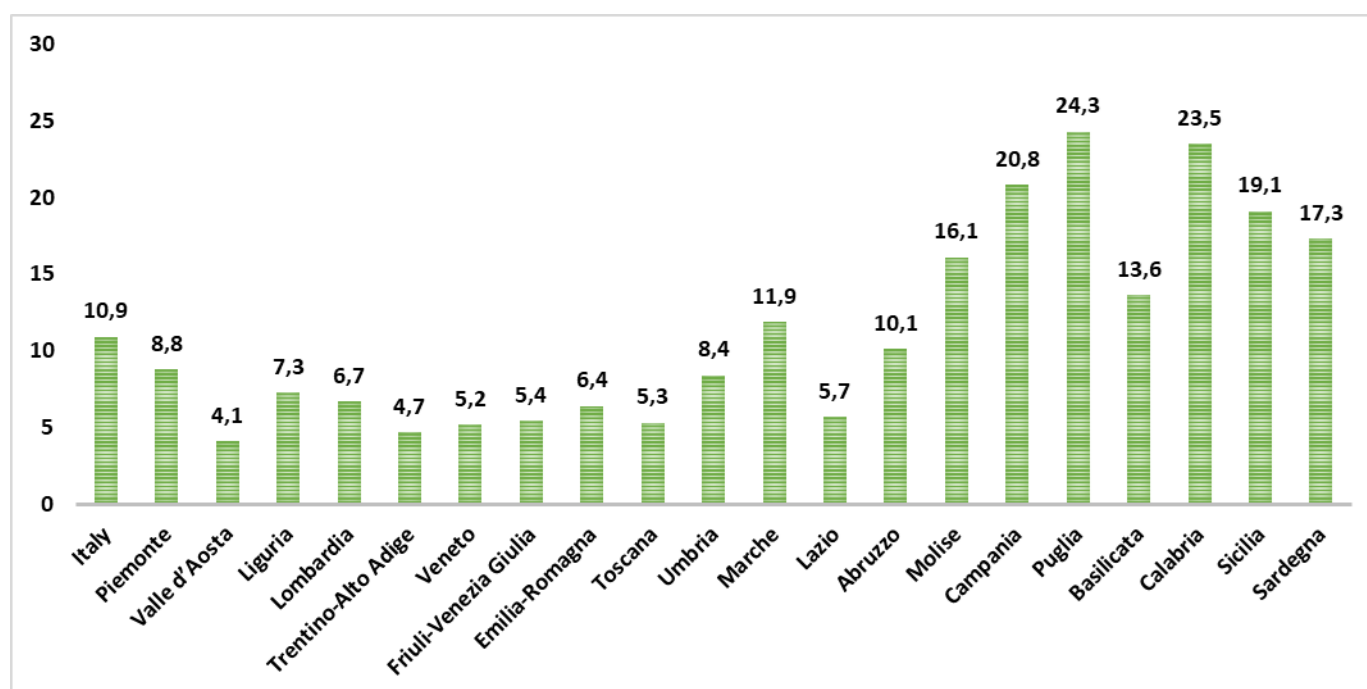
Despite this comparatively positive trend, Basilicata remains distant from national standards, maintaining a +2.7% point gap. Although the Lucanian situation is less severe than in other southern regions—such as Puglia (24.3%), Calabria (23.5%), or Campania (20.8%)—it exhibits higher poverty levels than nearly all regions in the Center-North, with the sole exception of Marche (ISTAT, 2025). Effectively, approximately one in seven households in Basilicata lives in a state of economic disadvantage (ISTAT, 2025).

**Table 6.** *Household relative poverty: a comparative synthesis (2024). Source: ISTAT (2025), Poverty in Italy, Year 2024*

Area	Incidence of households in relative poverty (%)	Deviation from the national average
Italy	10,9%	—
North Italy	6,6%	-4,3 p.p.
Central Italy	6,5%	-4,4 p.p.
South Italy	20%	+9,1 p.p.
Basilicata	13,6%	+2,7 p.p.

The data summarized in the previous table are visually represented in Figure 5, which illustrates the incidence of relative poverty and highlights the regional disparities that characterize the Italian socio-economic landscape.

**Figure 5.** Incidence of relative poverty among households (2024): a comparative perspective between Basilicata, macro-areas, and selected regions (%). Source: Author's elaboration based on ISTAT (2025) data



Despite these critical issues, Basilicata is not a 'residual' space, but rather a territory endowed with significant endogenous resources. Its natural capital, widespread cultural heritage, and high-quality

agri-food traditions represent strategic assets for sustainable development models and experiential tourism. In this regard, the region has proven its ability to activate powerful culture-led development levers, as evidenced by the experience of Matera as the European Capital of Culture in 2019, which generated exponential growth in tourist flows and international visibility (Macri & Samà, 2022; Genovese et al., 2025). Furthermore, local communities exhibit a latent resilience, maintaining dense social networks that often compensate for the shortcomings of institutional welfare.

In conclusion, Basilicata constitutes an archetype of the Italian Inner Area: a place where the challenge of well-being depends on the capacity to transform geographical marginality into a new form of centrality based on quality of life, requiring analytical approaches that go beyond mere economic indicators in order to capture the immaterial dimensions and the capabilities of its inhabitants.

## **7 Conclusions**

This chapter has outlined the theoretical and conceptual framework within which the analysis of quality of life in inner areas is situated, showing how this notion is the outcome of a progressive evolution that has moved from a utilitarian and one-dimensional paradigm toward a multidimensional, contextual, and spatially situated understanding of well-being. The historical reconstruction has highlighted how abandoning the identification of well-being with economic growth constituted a crucial step, opening the way to metrics and approaches capable of integrating material, relational, subjective, and institutional dimensions.

Within this trajectory, the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011) emerges as the most appropriate theoretical reference for interpreting quality of life in territorially fragile contexts. The centrality attributed to substantive freedoms—understood as real opportunities to be and to do—makes it possible to overcome both the limits of purely economic measures and those of exclusively subjective evaluations. In particular, attention to conversion factors—environmental, social, and institutional—allows for grasping the structuring role of territory in the production of well-being, rendering the capabilities approach intrinsically sensitive to the spatial dimension.

The exploration of the “spatial turn” in the social sciences has shown that well-being is strongly geographically differentiated and that territorial inequalities affect not only material living conditions, but also opportunities for participation, institutional trust, and the quality of citizenship. From this perspective, Italian inner areas represent a paradigmatic case: territories in which the formal equality of rights confronts a substantive inequality in access to essential services, translating into concrete constraints on individual and collective capabilities.

The conceptual distinction between rurality and innerness, introduced through reference to the National Strategy for Inner Areas, has made it possible to move beyond reductive readings based exclusively on morphological or demographic criteria. Innerness emerges as a functional category, directly linked to accessibility to citizenship rights, which makes explicit the relationship between space and life opportunities. Within this framework, inner areas cannot be interpreted solely as deficit territories, but rather as contexts characterized by a structural tension between fragility and potential.

The analysis of the determinants of quality of life in fragile territories has in fact shown that well-being does not derive from a simple aggregation of indicators, but from a dynamic—often unstable—balance between negative drivers (service thinning, depopulation, isolation, digital divide) and positive drivers (social capital, environmental quality, sense of belonging, community resilience). Concepts such as *restanza*, territorial capital, and place attachment help explain why, in some inner contexts, relatively high levels of life satisfaction may coexist with significant infrastructural deficiencies, without, however, neutralizing their structural effects.

Within this framework, Basilicata emerges as an archetype of Italian inner areas and as a privileged laboratory for the empirical analysis of quality of life. The near-total overlap between rurality and innerness, combined with the simultaneous presence of socio-economic criticalities and significant environmental and relational resources, makes the region particularly suitable for applying a multidimensional and place-based approach to well-being.

Overall, the chapter has provided the theoretical foundations necessary to justify the choice of a multi-method research design, based on the integration of institutional perspectives and lived experiences, qualitative and quantitative tools. Quality of life in inner areas thus emerges not as a given outcome, but as a socially and territorially constructed process, requiring analytical instruments capable of capturing its complexity. On these premises rests the empirical part of the thesis, aimed at exploring how capabilities are concretely configured in the inner territories of Basilicata and how they are perceived, interpreted, and governed by local actors.

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## **PART II – EMPIRICAL SECTION**

### **Chapter 2 – Stakeholders’ perceptions of factors shaping quality of life in rural areas**

#### ***Abstract***

This chapter examines how local institutional stakeholders perceive and define quality of life in inner rural areas, focusing on the Basilicata region. Using an exploratory qualitative design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with local administrators and applies computational textual analysis techniques (IRaMuTeQ), including word clouds, similarity analysis, and Descending Hierarchical Classification.

The results show that quality of life is primarily understood in relation to access to essential services—especially healthcare, education, and transport—and is deeply affected by a self-reinforcing cycle of depopulation, service reduction, and territorial isolation. While environmental assets, agriculture, and local initiatives are recognised as potential development resources, their impact is limited by institutional constraints, weak administrative capacity, and difficulties in governance coordination.

Overall, the findings portray quality of life in inner areas as a territorially embedded construct shaped by the interaction between structural vulnerabilities and locally driven responses. The chapter provides a grounded empirical basis for the subsequent capabilities-based modelling of quality of life developed in the following chapter.

## **1 Introduction**

As discussed in Chapter 1, quality of life in inner areas is a multidimensional and territorially embedded construct, shaped by the interaction between structural constraints, local resources, and the real opportunities individuals and communities have to pursue valued ways of living. Within this framework, understanding quality of life requires not only the analysis of objective indicators and residents' perceptions, but also attention to the viewpoints of institutional actors who are directly involved in governing territorial development processes.

Local stakeholders—such as administrators, policy-makers, and representatives of territorial institutions—play a crucial role in interpreting local needs, defining development priorities, and mediating between national policy frameworks and place-specific conditions. Their perceptions therefore provide a privileged lens through which to explore how quality of life is understood, framed, and operationalized in inner areas.

Building on the theoretical and contextual framework outlined in Chapter 1, this chapter adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to investigate how key local stakeholders conceptualize quality of life in the inner areas of the Basilicata region. Rather than applying a predefined theoretical model, the analysis aims to reconstruct the dimensions of quality of life as they emerge from stakeholders' narratives, allowing for a bottom-up identification of relevant factors.

The findings of this chapter serve a dual purpose. First, they contribute to the empirical literature on quality of life in fragile territories by highlighting the priorities and concerns articulated by institutional actors. Second, and more importantly within the logic of this thesis, they provide the conceptual basis for the construction of the capabilities-based measurement model developed in Chapter 3, thereby linking institutional perspectives with residents' perceptions in a sequential research design.

## **2 Methodology**

### **2.1 Methodological approach and research design**

This study adopts a qualitative methodology with an exploratory purpose. The research design is guided by three general research questions formulated to analyse the relationship between quality of life, local governance, and conditions of territorial marginality. These questions are intentionally broad in order to capture the complexity of the social, institutional, and territorial processes under investigation. The aim is to explore the perceptions of key local stakeholders regarding the factors that influence quality of life in rural contexts. This choice, grounded in a bottom-up logic, reflects the need to capture direct experiences and socio-cultural nuances that are often overlooked by top-down

quantitative approaches (Corbetta, 2015). Such an approach is particularly suitable for understanding human experiences within their natural context and for building theory inductively from empirical data (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Sutton and Austin, 2015).

The instrument for data collection was the semi-structured interview, selected for its capacity to ensure both flexibility in inquiry and comparability across data sets. As highlighted by Hijmans and Kuyper (2020), this technique relies on a thematic guide and open-ended questions, allowing the conversational path to be adapted while ensuring analytical depth. The interview protocol (available in appendix A), composed of 13 questions, was developed on the basis of key dimensions emerging from previous research on viability and well-being in marginal areas (Casini et al., 2021). These dimensions were used to operationalise the research questions through a contextualised adaptation of existing empirical evidence, specifically calibrated for local administrators operating in inner rural areas. Rather than establishing a one-to-one correspondence, each of the three research questions was explored through a set of complementary questions, ensuring coherence between the theoretical framework, the research questions, and the data collection instruments.

More specifically, the interview protocol addressed selected dimensions of rural life (Meloni et al., 2023), including access to and satisfaction with essential services, social cohesion and perceived safety, environmental quality and territorial assets, demographic challenges, and opportunities related to local development and public funding. The interviews were conducted online between May and September 2023, each lasting approximately 50–60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent.

## **2.2 Sample**

As illustrated in Chapter 1, the Basilicata region constitutes the empirical context of the entire research. Building on this shared territorial framework, the present study employed a purposive sampling strategy aimed at engaging institutional stakeholders capable of offering both strategic and operational perspectives on local dynamics.

The target population consisted of mayors of municipalities classified as peripheral or ultra-peripheral within the selected inner areas. Participants were identified based on the following inclusion criteria: (i) holding an elected institutional role at the municipal level; (ii) direct responsibility in local governance and service provision; and (iii) territorial location within inner areas characterised by structural marginality.

All eligible mayors were contacted via official institutional email addresses and invited to participate in a qualitative semi-structured interview. The final sample consists exclusively of those

who agreed to participate, thus constituting a self-selected sample drawn from the broader population of local decision-makers. This recruitment process may introduce a self-selection bias, as participants more interested in or engaged with the topic may have been more likely to respond. In addition, the composition of the sample may reflect an institutional perspective bias, as the exclusive focus on mayors may privilege governance- and service-related dimensions of quality of life, potentially underrepresenting aspects emerging from everyday lived experiences. Furthermore, as public office holders, participants may be subject to social desirability or positional bias, possibly leading to the strategic framing of local conditions or policy priorities. Finally, the limited diversity of viewpoints inherent in the sample—restricted to institutional actors—means that other relevant perspectives, such as those of residents, local businesses, civil society organisations, or service users, are not directly captured in this phase of the research.

However, this limitation is partially addressed in the overall research design, as the subsequent empirical study (Chapter 3) explicitly incorporates the perspectives of residents, thereby complementing the institutional viewpoint and enabling a more comprehensive and multi-actor understanding of quality of life in inner areas.

Specifically, the sample includes four mayors and one President of a Union of Municipalities, who also serves as mayor. Although limited in size ( $N = 5$ ) and not statistically representative, the sample is appropriate for the exploratory purpose of qualitative research, as it comprises information-rich actors directly involved in decision-making and territorial management processes. The aim is not to achieve statistical generalisation, but to generate analytically relevant insights grounded in the perspectives of institutional stakeholders. This composition ensures qualified institutional representation and provides privileged insights into local perceptions, priorities, and governance strategies in inner areas, with validity lying in interpretative depth rather than numerical representativeness.

A summary overview of the sample composition, including ID, role, and geographical origin, is provided in Table 1.

The decision to involve mayors does not stem from the assumption that their viewpoint is the most relevant among all stakeholders, but from the recognition that they are among the most representative figures for their territory, in their capacity as "first citizens" and spokespersons for the local population. Furthermore, they are key actors in local change, as they directly lead the processes of planning, management, and administrative innovation, particularly in peripheral contexts where local government plays a crucial role in ensuring the provision of services and attracting resources for development (Viccaro, 2021).

**Table 1.** *Sample composition*

<b>ID</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>MB_01</b>	Mayor	Basilicata
<b>MB_02</b>	Mayor	Basilicata
<b>MB_03</b>	Mayor and President of Union of Municipalities	Basilicata
<b>MB_04</b>	Mayor	Basilicata
<b>MB_05</b>	Mayor	Basilicata

### **2.3 Data analysis and methodological tools**

The analysis of the empirical material was designed to combine the depth of qualitative interpretation with the efficiency of computational methods by tools for textual analysis. This approach aimed to identify recurring themes, relational patterns, and semantic structures emerging from stakeholders' narratives, while maintaining strong adherence to the original discourse (Chaves et al., 2017; Ratinaud, 2008).

The transcriptions were carried out using an open coding approach (McLeod, 2024), according to the Grounded Theory Method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), based on a word-by-word and event-by-event logic, to maximise fidelity to the participants' expressions and to enable the emergence of meaningful interpretative cues (Tarozzi, 2008). This detailed and unfiltered transcription ensured that the subjective nuances of each interviewee's narrative were retained as input for the subsequent stages of text processing and analysis. For example, the following segment from interview MB\_01: "*We have two main urban centres more than 18 km apart... we have the same human resources as an average municipality but we have to manage twice as much*". Was coded as: infrastructure duplication, administrative fragmentation, human resource strain.

To enhance the reliability of the qualitative coding process, the open coding procedure was conducted iteratively, with emerging categories continuously refined through repeated readings of the transcripts. The coding outcomes were then cross-checked against the full textual corpus to ensure consistency and coherence between individual coded segments and the broader narrative context. This approach helped to minimise interpretative bias and to maintain a strong grounding of the categories in the original data.

The transcripts were further processed using IRaMuTeQ (Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires) software, version 0.7 alpha 2, developed by Pierre Ratinaud (2008). The IRaMuTeQ software was chosen because it supports a systematic and

comparative textual analysis aimed at a multi-level understanding of stakeholder perceptions (Rodríguez et al., 2024, Mendes et al., 2016; Souza et al., 2018). Its primary strength lies in applying quantitative methods to qualitative data, thus enriching the interpretation with statistical evidence without sacrificing the depth of the original discourse (Camargo and Justo, 2013; Lahlou, 2012). Furthermore, its suite of integrated tools ensures methodological coherence across all phases of the analysis (Ratinaud, 2008; Mennani and Attak, 2024).

The analysis followed a multi-phase process using several of IRaMuTeQ's analytical tools to examine stakeholder perceptions within the Basilicata inner areas. Initially, we conducted an exploratory analysis using a word cloud and similarity analysis to identify core concepts and reveal their underlying connections, effectively mapping the stakeholders' discourse (DePaolo and Wilkinson, 2014; Bletzer, 2015; Segev, 2022). Following this, we applied Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) to inductively group the text into coherent thematic clusters. Finally, a factor-analytic representation with CFA was employed as an additional exploratory step to summarise the relational structure emerging from the thematic clusters identified through the DHC. Given the qualitative nature of the study and the limited number of interviews, this analysis is not intended as a formal confirmatory validation in the strict psychometric sense. Rather, it is employed as an auxiliary descriptive and exploratory tool to summarise the relational structure emerging from the thematic clusters identified through the DHC. Its function is therefore interpretative and heuristic, supporting the qualitative reading of stakeholders' narratives rather than providing inferential validation (Brown, 2015; Mishra, 2016). This structured approach enabled a detailed, comparative analysis of perceptions of rural well-being.

The robustness of the analysis was further strengthened through methodological triangulation, combining qualitative interpretation with multiple computational text analysis techniques. In particular, the convergence of results across word cloud analysis, similarity structures, and Descending Hierarchical Classification allowed for the identification of recurring themes that were not dependent on a single analytical procedure. Greater analytical confidence was attributed to those patterns consistently emerging across different methods and levels of analysis.

For this study, the interview transcripts were organised into a single textual corpus representing stakeholders from the Basilicata inner areas. The corpus consisted of five interviews, defined as Initial Context Units (ICUs) (Souza et al., 2018). The corpus was analysed using word cloud visualization, similarity analysis, Descending Hierarchical Classification, and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Camargo and Justo, 2013; Castro et al., 2014). To ensure data integrity, only "full" language elements—namely adjectives, nouns, verbs, and auxiliary forms—were retained during corpus preparation, thereby enhancing semantic richness and analytical depth. Corpus preprocessing

involved standardising acronyms, correcting typographical errors, and harmonising compound terms (e.g., “*wild\_animals*”, “*hydrogeological\_instability*”) to ensure consistent computational processing.

In order to ensure the overall quality and consistency of the textual corpus, all interview transcripts were carefully reviewed prior to analysis. Particular attention was paid to transcription accuracy, lexical coherence, and completeness of the narratives. As the study relies on semi-structured interviews rather than structured questionnaire items, the issue of missing data does not arise in the same form as in quantitative research. All interviews were completed and included in full in the corpus, and no cases were excluded due to substantial incompleteness or poor data quality. Minor linguistic inconsistencies were corrected during preprocessing, while preserving the original semantic content of the participants’ narratives.

In accordance with the methodological principles of the Grounded Theory approach, the interviews were analysed in their original language (Italian) without any translation or modification. This choice is consistent with established practices in the literature (e.g., Karim et al., 2024; Chaves et al., 2022; Galli and Fasanelli, 2020; Souza et al., 2018), which frequently employ IRaMuTeQ for the textual analysis of qualitative data while preserving the original linguistic structure of the narratives.

The analysis revealed core themes shaping perceptions of rural well-being in the Basilicata inner areas, highlighting both shared concerns and context-specific dynamics. The methodological process provided a nuanced and grounded understanding of local well-being conditions, offering empirically informed insights relevant for addressing territorial challenges and supporting sustainable development strategies in marginal rural contexts.

## **2.4 Data quality, limitations, and robustness considerations**

This study was designed as an exploratory qualitative investigation and should be interpreted accordingly. The quality of the evidence does not rely on statistical representativeness, but on the contextual relevance of the participants, the depth of the interview material, and the coherence of the analytical procedures adopted.

From a data quality perspective, the use of full interview transcripts, analysed in their original language and subjected to systematic preprocessing, ensured a high level of fidelity to participants’ narratives and minimised semantic distortions. The iterative coding process and the alignment between qualitative interpretation and computational textual analysis further contributed to maintaining consistency between empirical material and analytical outputs.

At the same time, some limitations must be acknowledged. As discussed in Section 2.2, the sample is limited in size and restricted to institutional actors, which may influence the range of perspectives captured. In addition, the qualitative and exploratory nature of the analysis does not allow for inferential generalisation beyond the specific context under study.

However, analytical robustness is supported by the convergence of results across multiple analytical techniques, including qualitative coding, similarity analysis, and Descending Hierarchical Classification. Greater confidence is attributed to patterns that emerge consistently across these different levels of analysis rather than from isolated findings.

Finally, within the broader multi-method research design, the limitations associated with the exclusive focus on institutional stakeholders in this phase are addressed in the subsequent empirical study (Chapter 3), which incorporates residents' perspectives. This sequential integration of different viewpoints contributes to a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of quality of life in inner areas.

This qualitative phase should be interpreted as predominantly exploratory in nature. The analysis of interviews with local administrators is not intended to provide statistically generalizable evidence, but rather to identify initial interpretative hypotheses and to uncover salient dimensions of quality of life in inner areas. In this perspective, the limited sample size ( $n = 5$ ) is consistent with the research objective, which focuses on the identification of discursive frames and emerging conceptual categories rather than representativeness.

Within this framework, the use of IRaMuTeQ remains informative in an exploratory sense, as it enables the structuring of lexical recurrences and semantic relationships, offering a systematic mapping of the main nuclei of meaning without implying claims of statistical generalization.

### **3 Results**

The findings presented in this section are derived from semi-structured interviews with mayors from municipalities located in the Basilicata region. Although the sample is not statistically representative, the analysis holds significant analytical value. It reflects the perspective of key institutional actors whose political and administrative vision provides a privileged insight into the dynamics shaping quality of life in inner areas. Their accounts constitute the primary empirical material on which the following analysis is based.

### 3.1 Word cloud and thematic coding

The application of IRaMuTeQ software facilitated the creation of word clouds, a technique that aggregates words and organizes them graphically based on their frequency in the text. Words that appear more frequently are displayed in larger sizes, offering a visually engaging and straightforward method for identifying key themes in the qualitative data. The generated word cloud highlighted recurring issues raised by local stakeholders in the Basilicata inner areas (Figure 1) and represents a first level of exploration of the textual data. Furthermore, to enrich the understanding of the underlying meanings, a qualitative thematic coding was carried out based on the full texts (Table 2).

The coding followed an inductive and iterative approach (Thomas, 2003), which allowed us to identify the main thematic areas and semantic interconnections between concepts emerging from the interviews. The most significant themes were organised into main categories and subcategories, as shown in the table below:

**Table 2.** *Thematic coding*

<b>Thematic Code</b>	<b>Key Issues</b>
Essential services	Schools, healthcare, local public transport
Human resources	Staff shortages, NEETs, turnover
Territorial development	Tourism, agriculture, circular economy
Structural vulnerabilities	Hydro-geological instability, isolation, bureaucracy
Demographics and population	Depopulation, birth/death rate, immigration
Governance and administration	Union of municipalities, PNRR funds, inland area planning

This structure has made it possible to interpret word clouds not only in terms of frequency, but as a visual representation of a complex network of meanings, consistent with territorial narratives.



### A. Depopulation and Demographic Trajectories

The phenomenon of depopulation (*spopolamento/calò demografico*) in Basilicata is not merely a statistical trend but represents a profound and systemic lived experience for local communities. Interview data reveal a deeply negative natural balance (births versus deaths), in which mortality significantly exceeds natality, combined with a persistent out-migration of younger generations. As one stakeholder (MB\_01) stated, “*We are losing entire generations. They reach the age of 18 and then [...] they leave*”. This process is further quantified by another interviewee (MB\_03), who noted: “*The natural balance (births vs. deaths) is minus 18, minus 19, which means that in five years, almost 100 inhabitants have been lost*”.

These narratives highlight a structural demographic contraction characterized by youth exodus, demographic imbalance, and population decline. Depopulation emerges not only as a demographic outcome but as a cumulative process that reshapes the social fabric, undermines the sustainability of local services, and constrains long-term development prospects. From the perspective of local administrators, demographic decline is experienced as a self-reinforcing dynamic, in which population loss reduces opportunities, further accelerating out-migration and weakening community resilience.

### B. Essential Services and Quality of Life

The term “essential services” (*servizi essenziali*) emerges as a central element in stakeholders’ narratives and is primarily associated with conditions of scarcity and fragmentation. In the Basilicata context, access to and management of essential services are perceived as structurally problematic, largely due to administrative fragmentation and limited demographic scale. As one stakeholder explained (MB\_02): “*As a highly fragmented municipality, we are compelled to manage multiple instances of every service [...], which results in a duplication or triplication of both problems and costs.*”

These difficulties are particularly evident in the educational sector, where declining population numbers threaten the sustainability of basic services. One mayor highlighted this issue by noting (MB\_04): “*Our school has only 30 children in total. This makes it challenging to sustain the organization of services.*” Such conditions point to a progressive erosion of the critical mass required to guarantee the continuity and efficiency of essential services, especially in peripheral municipalities.

From an analytical perspective, these narratives are captured by the codes inefficient duplication of public services and erosion of the critical mass for educational services, which reflect the structural constraints affecting quality of life in inner areas. Essential services thus emerge not only as a

determinant of well-being but also as a key arena in which demographic decline, territorial fragmentation, and institutional capacity intersect, shaping residents' everyday experiences and local administrators' perceptions of quality of life.

### *C. Work*

The term “to work” (*lavorare*) emerges in the word cloud as a central theme in the narratives of Basilicata's stakeholders and is associated with a lack of job opportunities. Interviewees consistently highlight the absence of stable employment as a major constraint on local development and individual life trajectories. In particular, work is described as a missing condition that prevents the effective valorisation of territorial resources and undermines residents' ability to remain in the area.

Several stakeholders point to the presence of a large segment of the NEET population (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), especially among young people, who struggle to find meaningful employment paths. As one interviewee (MB\_03) notes: “[...] *work is the big absent and it does not allow us to catch the opportunities of the territory [...], [...]* there is a very large segment of NEET population, they have difficulties to find their own work dimension [...]”. These narratives underline how limited employment opportunities are intertwined with structural weaknesses in the local labour market, including skills mismatch and the scarcity of diversified economic activities. In this sense, work is framed not merely as an economic issue, but as a crucial determinant of demographic stability, social inclusion, and the long-term viability of inner areas.

### *D. Tourism Development Strategies*

In Basilicata, the concept of “tourism” (*turismo*) emerges as a strategic dimension closely connected to processes of territorial redefinition and local identity-building. Stakeholders describe tourism development as increasingly oriented toward territorial branding and the valorisation of specialized niches capable of differentiating local offerings within broader tourism markets. In particular, wellness-related tourism is identified as a promising pathway for enhancing local attractiveness and generating new development opportunities. This orientation is exemplified by the initiative to establish “*a territorial brand called Latronico, city of wellness*” (MB\_01), which reflects an experiential tourism model centred on health, well-being, and the specific environmental and cultural assets of the area. Such narratives highlight a shift from generic tourism promotion toward more place-based and experience-oriented strategies, aimed at strengthening the visibility of inner areas and fostering more sustainable forms of local economic development.

### *E. Environmental Management and Risk Perception*

Finally, the issue of hydrogeological instability (*dissesto idrogeologico*) emerges as a central concern in the narratives of Basilicata's local administrators, framing environmental risk as a defining feature of territorial vulnerability. Interviewees consistently describe this phenomenon as an immediate and recurrent threat that directly affects the safety, habitability, and long-term sustainability of local communities. As one interviewee stated (MB\_01), “*Hydrogeological instability is the biggest issue [...]. Flooding, landslides, and canals that need to be fixed*”.

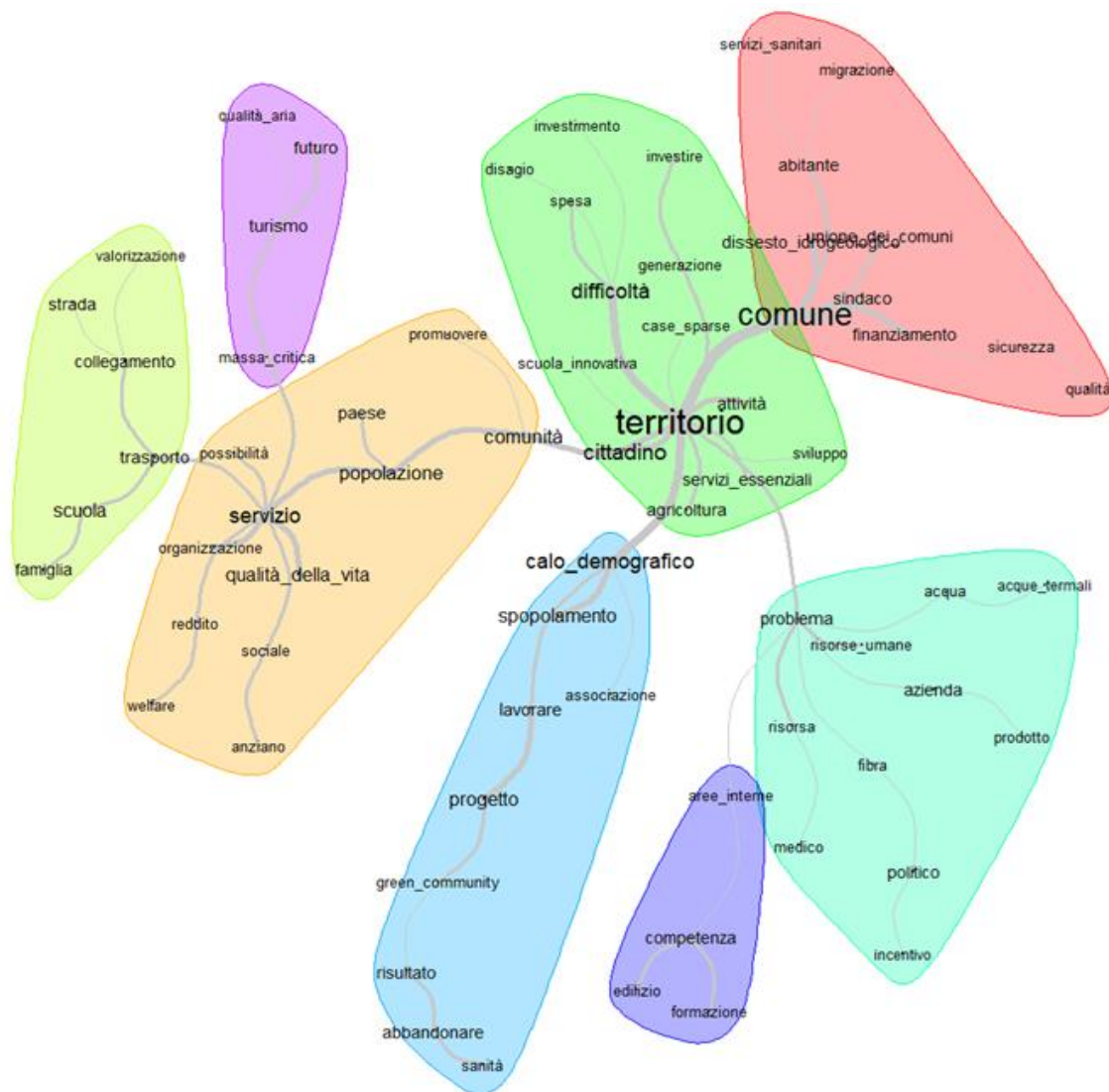
This perception reflects a widespread sense of exposure to structural fragility, where natural risk is experienced not as an occasional emergency but as a persistent condition embedded in everyday territorial governance. The narratives highlight the cumulative effects of geomorphological constraints, aging infrastructure, and limited maintenance capacity, reinforcing the idea that environmental risk represents a structural constraint on local development. Within the coding framework, these accounts are associated with the themes of structural fragility and natural risk, underscoring how environmental vulnerability shapes both risk perception and policy priorities in inner areas.

### 3.2 Similarity analysis

A similarity analysis was conducted using graph theory concepts to gain deeper insights into these dynamics. This method identifies co-occurrences within the text corpus, grouping closely related words into clusters. Each cluster represents a “lexical community” that reflects central themes in the representations of the participants (Salviati, 2017; Reinert, 1983). The more closely and/or overlapping are the blocks, greater is their commonality. In this way, words with a high level of co-occurrence each other will be found in the same communality, instead weakly connected with other communalities (Salviati, 2017). In Basilicata, the analysis revealed four main clusters (Figure 2): territory (*territorio*), municipality (*comune*), service (*servizio*), and demographic decline (*calo demografico*). The central cluster, “*territorio*”, included words such as citizen, essential services, agriculture, difficulty, and development. It is semantically dense and interconnected, highlighting how the territory is not perceived solely as a geographical space, but as a container of needs, challenges and potential. On the one hand, structural weaknesses linked to accessibility and geographical marginality; on the other, the presence of local resources, such as agriculture, which represent opportunities for revitalisation. Furthermore, showed a strong correlation with the cluster “*comune*”, which featured terms such as hydro-geological instability, safety, health services, migration, inhabitants, and funding.

The cluster “*comune*” focuses on institutional and managerial aspects. It is closely related to the themes of safety and environmental security, suggesting that municipalities are perceived as responsible for caring for the territory. The intersection between the two clusters reflects a structural relationship: the municipality is the institutional point of contact between citizens and the territory.

**Figure 2.** Similarity Analysis generated with the IRaMuTeQ software for Basilicata region. The map shows 4 main thematic clusters based on co-occurrences of terms: (1) territorio (land: green cluster), (2) comune (municipality: red cluster), (3) servizio (service: yellow cluster), (4) calo demografico (demographic decline: light blue cluster).



The cluster “*servizio*”, represents one of the central thematic areas in the text corpus analysed for Basilicata region. This semantic group has developed around a set of terms that denote a strong focus on social, infrastructural and quality of life needs in rural contexts. The most frequent and highly interconnected words include: income, welfare, social services, population ageing, quality of life, transport, school, roads, tourism, air quality, and future opportunities. Within this cluster, two main sub-themes emerge, which can be interpreted as functional sub-clusters. Sub-cluster 1: *Basic Services and Mobility*. This includes terms such as transport, school, and roads, which are linked to the daily accessibility and usability of the territory. These aspects are frequently associated with the logistical difficulties of inland areas, particularly for the elderly and students. Their presence in the discourse suggests a lived experience of isolation, which is attributed to a lack of fundamental public services. Sub-cluster 2: *Services for Development and Sustainability*. Featuring words like tourism, air quality, and future opportunities, a more proactive and forward-looking narrative emerges, oriented towards

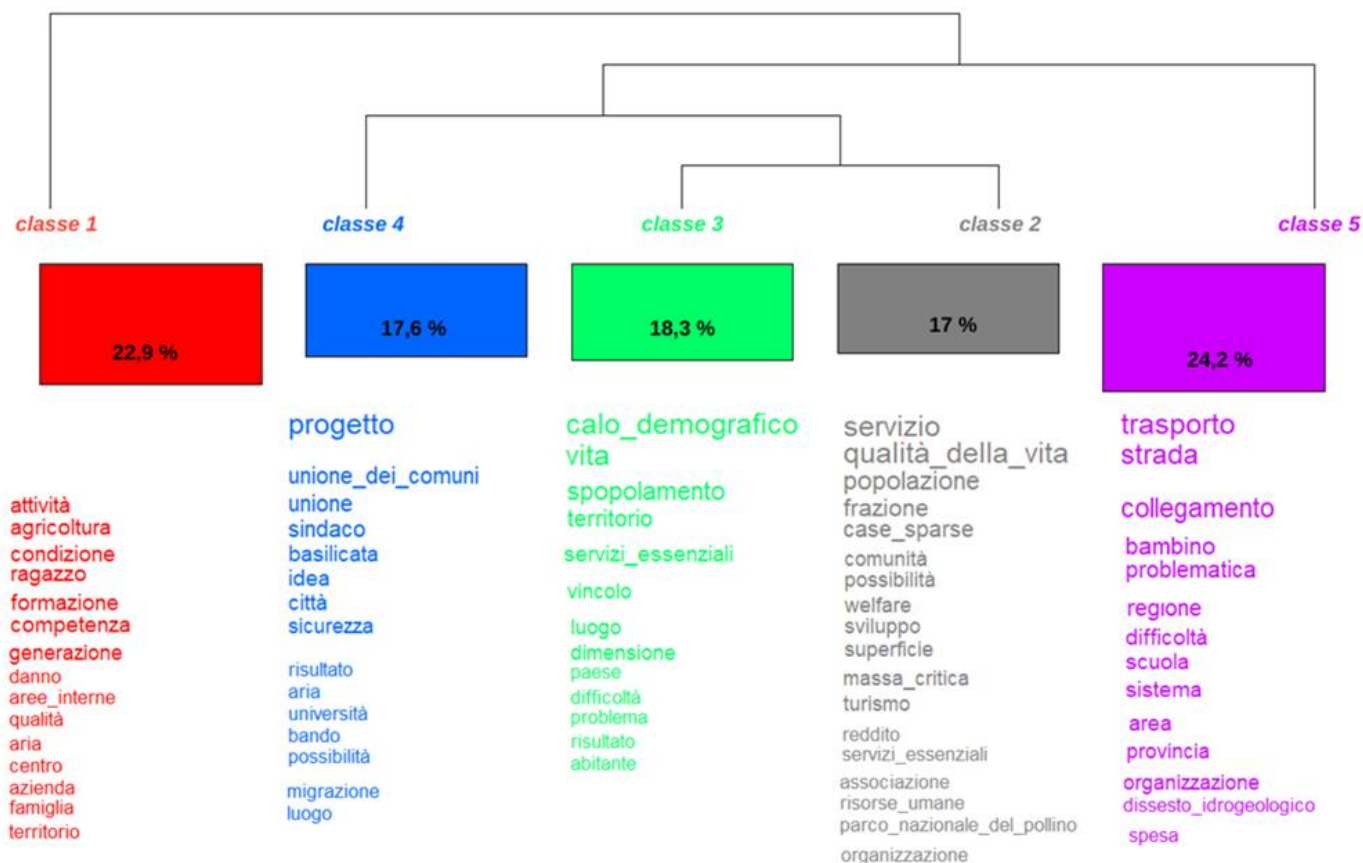
leveraging the territory as a resource for sustainable development. The cluster “*servizio*” was also correlated with the cluster “*territorio*”, a connection evidenced by their proximity and partial overlap on the cluster map. This suggests that services are intrinsically linked to the quality and sustainability of the territory. Furthermore, the semantic relationship with the “*calo demografico*” cluster is indirect but significant: the lack or inadequacy of services appears to be a structural cause of depopulation, while simultaneously representing a potential lever to reverse this trend if strengthened through targeted public investment. In summary, the “*servizio*” cluster reflects a set of concrete and perceived challenges in the daily lives of the inhabitants of Basilicata's inland areas. At the same time, it reveals a forward-looking perspective aimed at reconstructing a fabric of services capable of attracting and retaining the population, particularly its youth. This makes the cluster particularly rich and strategically significant for future territorial planning. The cluster “*calo demografico*”, related to the cluster “*territorio*”, grouped terms such as depopulation, desertion, work, project, and green community. This cluster underscores the pressing issue of demographic decline in Basilicata and the importance of developing projects, such as green community initiatives, to combat this challenge and foster regional resilience. The overlap with “*territorio*” underlines the interconnection between demographic dynamics and the quality of the living environment.

### 3.3 Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) and factor-analytic representation

A thematic exploration was conducted using the Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) technique to deepen the analysis, applying the Reinert method (1983). This approach facilitates the identification of clusters composed of words with shared characteristics represented through a dendrogram of classes (Souza et al., 2018). The DHC technique statistically identifies homogeneous groups of topics within a text corpus by analysing the frequency of words. The Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ ) test is employed to measure the associative strength between words and their respective classes, with values greater than 3.84 indicating statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$  (degrees of freedom= 1) (Lahlou, 2012).

In Basilicata, five distinct classes emerged from the analysis (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Descending Hierarchical Classification (DHC) of themes derived from the textual analysis of interviews related to the Basilicata region, generated using the IRaMuTeQ software. The five identified classes (red: Cluster 1, blue:



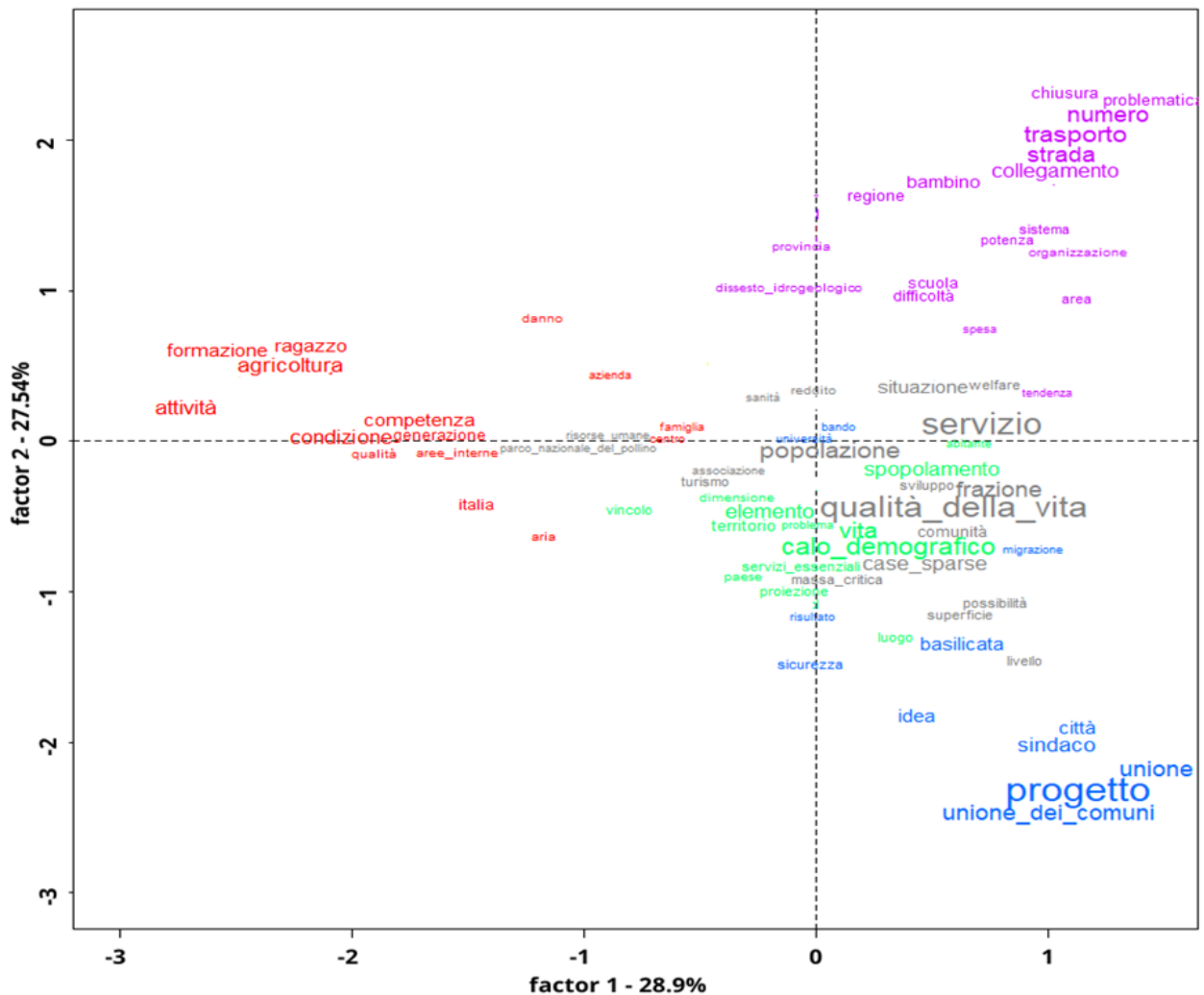
Cluster 4, green: Cluster 3, grey: Cluster 2, and purple: Cluster 5) group semantically related terms, highlighting the main topics discussed. The percentages indicate the distribution of terms across the different classes.

Class 5 (24.2%) is the most prominent, highlighting mobility issues, such as inadequate public transport and connections, damaged or impassable roads due to hydrogeological instability, and poor land management. This category reflects the physical and infrastructural crisis facing the region. For many public officials, mobility is not merely a logistical problem but a community-wide issue: such deficiencies lead to a scarcity of services and exacerbate depopulation. The difficulty in moving around restricts access to healthcare, education, employment, and culture, creating a vicious cycle of isolation and marginalization: *"Our small municipality remains isolated for three months of the year due to landslides. For this reason, we have implemented a social taxi service for the elderly and students."*

Class 1 (22.9%) emphasizes the relationship between agricultural land, production quality, and the shortage of young or adequately trained farmers. This class indicates a strong productive identity and reveals that while agricultural management is a valuable asset, it requires policies for generational renewal, support for innovation, and access to land. Without targeted action to attract young farmers, the rural fabric of the Basilicata region risks a progressive decline, regardless of the quality of its products. Class 3 (18.3%) addresses the intertwined issues of depopulation, demographic decline, and

essential services. This represents one of the main problems afflicting Basilicata's inner areas, where the lack of essential services contributes to depopulation and demographic decline. At the same time, the reduced population discourages the provision of such services, creating a negative vicious circle. Class 4 (17.6%) is the class of local strategies for development and resilience. This class represents communities that, despite structural constraints, demonstrate a distinct capacity for endogenous project development. Through resilient and community-based initiatives—often rooted in the cultural, tourism, or social sectors—these areas position themselves not as passive policy recipients, but as proactive agents experimenting with innovative solutions for local development. Finally, class 2 (17%) is the class of local governance, planning, and networks. Complementing the previous cluster, this group represents its political-institutional counterpart. Here, local governance, though operating with limited resources, is characterized by the adoption of innovative and integrated strategic planning. This includes initiatives such as smart welfare, the promotion of short supply chains, and administrative cooperation.

The factor-analytic representation further supports the qualitative interpretation of the identified thematic structure, highlighting two latent dimensions that collectively account for 56.44% of the total variance. The first factor, accounting for 28.9% of the variance, is defined as the *Axis of Project-Based Resilience*. The second factor (27.54%) represents the *Axis of Structural Criticality*. Together, these axes constitute two latent dimensions that semantically organize the discourse of local actors and are visualized on the X and Y axes in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of themes derived from the textual analysis of interviews related to the Basilicata region, generated using IRaMuTeQ software. The CFA reduces data dimensionality by grouping terms into two main factors (X-axis and Y-axis). The colour of the words corresponds to the clusters identified in Figure 5, highlighting the semantic associations between terms.

The analysis shows that classes 2, 3, and 4 are closely interconnected and situated in the same quadrant. This indicates the necessity of addressing major issues (class 3) by implementing targeted socio-economic initiatives (classes 2 and 4). This suggests that local communities are not passive in the face of the crisis, but develop detailed and proactive responses, even in a context of scarcity. Conversely, classes 1 and 5 are situated in separate quadrants, reflecting their relative independence and lack of a direct cause-and-effect relationship. While these classes address important themes highlighted by stakeholders, they are not perceived as directly influencing one another. The areas covered in the interviewees' texts remain more descriptive than strategic. In summary, the CFA in

Basilicata region confirms the centrality of the crisis-response dynamic, highlights critical "shadow areas," and underscores the coherence between perception and narrative.

#### 4 Discussions

The results presented through word cloud analysis, similarity analysis, and hierarchical classification provide important insights into how local stakeholders perceive quality of life in inner areas of Basilicata. Across the different analytical techniques, stakeholders consistently emphasized the centrality of essential services—particularly healthcare, education, and transport—as foundational elements of rural well-being. As highlighted by the similarity analysis (figure 2), the clusters labelled “*servizio*” and “*territorio*” emerge as core semantic nodes, confirming that service accessibility lies at the heart of rural vitality, as argued by Moseley and Owen (2008).

In the Basilicata context, however, perceptions of service provision are deeply intertwined with demographic decline and infrastructural constraints. The prominence of the “*calo demografico*” cluster reveals a widely shared understanding of a self-reinforcing cycle in which depopulation, service reduction, and territorial isolation mutually exacerbate one another. Stakeholders described how insufficient access to healthcare and transport contributes to population loss, which in turn undermines the sustainability of public services, further accelerating decline. This dynamic is clearly reflected in the DHC results (figure 3), which highlight a perceived need for urgent and coordinated interventions to interrupt this downward spiral. Such perceptions are consistent with the concept of “*rural vulnerability cycles*” (Marsden, 2009), whereby demographic, economic, and service-related disadvantages compound over time. Local administrators appear acutely aware of the everyday consequences of these processes, including school closures, shrinking social networks, and the erosion of human capital, all of which contribute to broader patterns of socio-economic stagnation (Black et al., 2019).

Another key dimension emerging from the analysis concerns agriculture and its role in shaping rural well-being. In Basilicata, agricultural activity is primarily associated with structural challenges. The results link agriculture to issues such as the lack of generational turnover, limited access to skills and training, and the environmental vulnerability of rural land. Stakeholders explicitly identified the absence of young and adequately trained farmers as a major threat to the long-term sustainability of the agricultural sector. This perception aligns with existing literature highlighting how demographic ageing and economic marginalization constrain agricultural renewal in rural regions (Li et al., 2019; Marsden, 2009). In this context, agriculture is not merely an economic activity but a reflection of broader territorial constraints that limit the capacity for endogenous development.

The role of local governance also emerges as a central theme in shaping perceptions of QoL. Stakeholders in Basilicata repeatedly pointed to institutional weaknesses, limited administrative capacity, and difficulties in coordinating development initiatives across fragmented territories. These governance challenges were particularly evident in references to bureaucratic complexity, shortages of skilled personnel within local administrations, and constrained access to financial resources. Such limitations were perceived as significant barriers to effectively addressing demographic decline, improving service provision, and leveraging local assets. This resonates with the place-based approach advocated by Barca et al. (2014).

Overall, the results underscore that rural development trajectories in Basilicata are deeply mediated by local perceptions, institutional capacity, and structural conditions. Rather than reflecting abstract or universal challenges, stakeholders' narratives reveal a context-specific understanding of QoL, shaped by lived experiences of marginality, distance, and demographic change. Issues such as service accessibility, agricultural sustainability, and population decline are not perceived in isolation but as interconnected dimensions of a broader territorial condition. This supports calls in the literature for development strategies that are sensitive to local contexts and capable of addressing the specific configurations of constraints and resources present in marginal rural areas (Marsden, 2016; Pugh and Dubois, 2021).

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of stakeholder perceptions in shaping rural governance and policy implementation. Local administrators play a key role in interpreting policy frameworks and translating them into concrete actions on the ground. Their perceptions influence which priorities are emphasized, which interventions are considered feasible, and how external policies are adapted to local realities (Lopolito et al., 2015; Scott, 2012). In the Basilicata case, these perceptions point to the need for policy approaches that go beyond standardized solutions and instead strengthen local institutional capacity, enhance coordination across municipalities, and address the cumulative nature of rural vulnerability. Such approaches are essential for improving quality of life in marginal rural areas and for supporting more resilient and sustainable development pathways.

## **5 Conclusions**

This study set out to investigate how local stakeholders in inner areas of Basilicata perceive quality of life and to identify the socio-territorial dynamics that shape rural development. The perspectives of local administrators, grounded in place-specific knowledge and lived experiences, offer valuable insights for informing policies and initiatives aimed at enhancing QoL and fostering community

revitalization in inner rural areas. Through a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, supported by textual processing, the study addressed three core research questions.

First, regarding the dimensions of well-being perceived as most relevant, stakeholders emphasized access to essential services—particularly healthcare, education, and transport—alongside economic opportunities and demographic stability. These dimensions were consistently framed as areas of structural fragility, reflecting long-standing deficits in service provision, limited employment prospects, and persistent population decline. Stakeholders' narratives highlighted how these factors interact to shape everyday living conditions and influence residents' decisions to remain in or leave inner areas.

Second, the analysis revealed a set of interrelated challenges that characterize the Basilicata context. Depopulation emerged as a central concern, closely linked to the erosion of essential services and to institutional and administrative constraints faced by local governments. These dynamics were described as mutually reinforcing processes, in which demographic decline reduces service viability, while service contraction further accelerates outmigration. At the same time, stakeholders recognized the presence of territorial resources—environmental assets, social cohesion, and local knowledge—that could support development trajectories if adequately supported by public action.

Third, the results illustrated the interaction among demographic dynamics, service provision, and territorial governance. The co-occurrence patterns and hierarchical classes identified through textual analysis pointed to cyclical mechanisms in which structural weaknesses contribute to the reproduction of marginality. In this sense, quality of life in Basilicata's inner areas emerges not as the outcome of isolated factors, but as the result of interconnected territorial, institutional, and demographic processes.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to debates on rural well-being by highlighting the central role of local perceptions in shaping development priorities and policy narratives. By foregrounding the viewpoints of local administrators, the findings show how interpretations of quality of life are closely tied to concrete governance challenges and to the capacity of institutions to respond to territorial needs. Methodologically, the integration of qualitative coding with textual analysis tools reinforces the value of combining interpretive and computational approaches in the study of rural and inner areas. From a methodological perspective, the factor-analytic representation should be interpreted as an exploratory aid to discourse interpretation rather than as confirmatory evidence, and future research with larger samples will be required to formally test the latent structure suggested by these findings.

The policy implications of these findings are significant. The evidence suggests that uniform, one-size-fits-all strategies are inadequate for addressing the specific challenges of inner areas. In the

Basilicata context, policy efforts should prioritize strengthening institutional capacity, ensuring the provision of essential services, and improving infrastructural and administrative conditions that affect everyday life. Interventions that fail to engage with local framings and lived experiences risk overlooking the mechanisms through which marginality is reproduced at the territorial level.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is based on a numerically small and non-statistically representative sample, consisting exclusively of five local administrators. While this choice is consistent with the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study, it limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the exclusive focus on mayors excludes other stakeholder groups whose perspectives could further enrich the understanding of quality of life in inner areas. Finally, the analysis is limited to the Basilicata region, characterized by specific socio-territorial configurations; therefore, the results reflect a strongly contextualized case and cannot be automatically extended to other rural contexts.

Future research should involve larger and more diversified samples, including additional stakeholder categories such as residents, young people, women, and sectoral actors, to deepen the understanding of intra-territorial dynamics. Expanding the analysis to other inner areas could also support comparative insights and contribute to broader theorization on rural marginality and development.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the importance of place-based and perception-led approaches in addressing the challenges faced by inner rural areas. By centering the voices of local administrators in Basilicata, it provides empirically grounded insights for designing policies that are sensitive to territorial specificities and responsive to the lived realities of marginal contexts.

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### **Chapter 3 - Applying Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach to rethink rural quality of life**

#### ***Abstract***

The present study proposes an innovative empirical model to assess Quality of Life (QoL) in rural and inland areas, grounded in Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach. While traditional metrics often rely on standardized economic indicators, this research adopts a territorially sensitive framework that operationalizes all ten central human capabilities to capture the multidimensional nature of well-being in fragile contexts. The model is applied to the Basilicata region (Italy), a territory emblematic of the structural tensions between marginality and development potential.

Data were collected through a structured survey of 600 residents across 27 peripheral and ultra-peripheral municipalities. Methodologically, the study employs Exploratory Factor Analysis (PCA) to validate the theoretical structure and Multiple Linear Regression to identify the primary determinants of perceived QoL.

The findings reveal a "materiality paradox": while objective deficits in infrastructure and services are pervasive, material resources (income and property) are not significant predictors of perceived well-being. This suggests that in contexts of structural marginality, where service deficiencies affect the entire community, the absolute level of income ceases to be the primary differentiator of well-being. Instead, the 'weight' of quality of life shifts toward intangible capabilities, where the substantive freedom to participate in local life and the ability to build meaningful social bonds act as compensatory mechanisms. Instead, QoL is primarily driven by intangible dimensions, with Control over the Political Environment emerging as the strongest positive predictor, followed by Emotions, Practical Reason, and Senses, Imagination, and Thought. Conversely, Bodily Integrity, Affiliation, and Other Species act as significant negative predictors, suggesting that insecurity and social exclusion operate as structural constraints on substantive freedoms.

These results demonstrate that QoL in inner areas is a relational and political construct rather than a purely economic one. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of place-based policies and integrated strategies that prioritize civic participation, social cohesion, and safety to unlock the latent resilience of rural communities.

## **1 Introduction**

Building on the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1, which conceptualizes quality of life as a multidimensional and territorially embedded process grounded in the Capabilities Approach, this chapter develops the second empirical study of the thesis and focuses on the measurement of quality of life from the perspective of residents living in inner areas.

While Chapter 2 explored the dimensions of quality of life emerging from the perceptions of local stakeholders, this chapter shifts the analytical focus to residents, investigating how different capabilities contribute to their subjective evaluation of quality of life. In doing so, the analysis responds to the need, identified in the literature, to integrate institutional perspectives with lived experiences in the assessment of well-being in territorially fragile contexts.

The specific objective of the chapter is to operationalize a capabilities-based model of quality of life inspired by Nussbaum's framework of central capabilities and to empirically assess which capabilities are most strongly associated with residents' perceived quality of life. To this end, a survey-based research design is adopted and applied to residents living in inner areas, with reference to the Basilicata region.

Nussbaum's framework is employed not as a rigid evaluative checklist, but as a conceptual guide for constructing a multidimensional model of quality of life that is sensitive to territorial specificities. In inner areas, the conversion of resources into effective opportunities is strongly mediated by spatial, infrastructural, and institutional factors, which are explicitly accounted for in the operationalisation of the capabilities. The proposed approach is characterised by the use of all ten central capabilities, the explicit operationalisation of each capability through empirical indicators, and the integration of both objective and subjective dimensions of well-being, including aspects such as access to services, mobility, safety, trust, belonging, and personal satisfaction.

This framework provides a coherent analytical basis for the empirical analysis developed in the following sections and contributes to advancing a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of quality of life in rural and peripheral contexts.

## **2 Methodological Framework**

### **2.1 Sample**

To ensure internal homogeneity and comparability across the analysed contexts, the study included only municipalities belonging to categories E (peripheral municipalities) and F (ultra-peripheral

municipalities) with populations ranging between 500 and 5,000 inhabitants. Municipalities classified as Intermediate (D) or Belt (C), as well as those falling within categories E or F but characterised by significantly different demographic sizes, were therefore excluded. This selection process resulted in the identification of 27 municipalities, considered representative of the most acute conditions of marginality within the regional territory (SNAI, 2024).

The sampling design adopted a mixed strategy, combining probabilistic and non-probabilistic techniques, in order to ensure adequate representativeness of the resident population with respect to key socio-demographic characteristics (Lohr, 2021). In operational terms, the sampling strategy combined an ex-ante stratification based on key socio-demographic variables with a voluntary participation procedure at the field level. This means that the target distribution of respondents was defined with reference to age, gender, and territorial distribution, while inclusion within each stratum depended on participants' willingness to take part in the survey. Accordingly, this mixed approach was adopted to balance statistical criteria of sample structuring with the practical feasibility of fieldwork in marginal rural contexts, where purely random sampling is often difficult to implement, particularly in sparsely populated and territorially fragmented inner areas.

The sampling process was conducted between January and March 2024, using official population data provided by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), referring to the resident population as of 1 January 2023 and disaggregated by age, gender, and marital status for the selected municipalities.

The sample size was determined by setting a 95% confidence level and a 4% margin of error, resulting in a target sample of 600 respondents. The resulting sample size was considered adequate not only in statistical terms, but also in relation to the analytical objectives of the study, namely the exploration of the relationship between capabilities and perceived quality of life across a territorially homogeneous set of marginal municipalities. Stratification by gender, age groups, and territorial distribution, combined with voluntary participation, allowed for balanced coverage of the main demographic groups, thereby enhancing the reliability and robustness of the subsequent analyses (Kalton & Flores-Cervantes, 2003). The socio-demographic structure of the sample reflects the typical characteristics of Italian inner areas, with a predominantly ageing population, relatively low-income levels, and an employment structure that continues to pose specific challenges for young people and women (Gizzi et al., 2019; Spagnoli, 2022).

Although the sample was structured to ensure balanced coverage across key socio-demographic groups, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, participation was voluntary, which may introduce both self-selection and non-response bias, as individuals more interested in local issues or more willing to engage may have been overrepresented, while those who did not participate may

differ systematically in terms of engagement, socio-economic conditions, or perceptions of quality of life. Second, despite stratification efforts, some population segments may remain underrepresented due to differential accessibility or availability at the time of data collection. Third, the deliberate focus on peripheral and ultra-peripheral municipalities enhances internal homogeneity but limits the direct generalisability of the findings to less marginal rural contexts or to the regional population as a whole.

Detailed information on the socio-demographic variables considered is reported in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Summary description</b>
<b>Age group</b>	18–25 years	15.2	Heterogeneous distribution; significant representation of young adults and individuals over 65.
	26–35 years	12.6	
	36–45 years	13.8	
	46–55 years	12	
	56–65 years	12.1	
	66–75 years	12.3	
	76–85 years	11.2	
	86+ years	10.8	
<b>Gender</b>	Male	49.4	Balanced gender representation.
	Female	50.6	
<b>Education</b>	Primary school	8.6	Prevalence of medium-high educational attainment; however, a significant portion of low educational levels remains.
	Lower secondary school	15.5	
	Vocational qualification	7.3	
	High school diploma	43.4	
	University degree	24	
	PhD	1.2	
<b>Income</b>	€0–15,000	41.5	Prevalence of low-to-middle income. The income distribution reveals economic vulnerability.
	€15,001–28,000	43.2	
	€28,001–50,000	14.4	
	Over €50,000	0.9	
<b>Employment status</b>	Student	14.8	Majority are employed, with a notable presence of retirees and homemakers.
	Employed	45.6	
	Unemployed	5.5	
	Retired	26.1	
	Homemaker	8	

## 2.2 Survey Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

The survey instrument was developed within the Capabilities Approach framework with the aim of assessing perceived quality of life in the inner areas of Basilicata, ensuring consistency with the structure of the ten central capabilities identified by Nussbaum (2000; 2011), while at the same time allowing for adequate adaptation to the specific characteristics of rural contexts.

The questionnaire development process unfolded in several stages. First, the capabilities were adopted as the analytical framework for empirical operationalization, identifying for each of them the aspects most relevant to the socio-economic, environmental, and cultural conditions of the study region. In particular, the capability concerning Control over one’s environment was disaggregated into two distinct dimensions—control over the political environment and control over the material environment—in order to more accurately capture, on the one hand, opportunities for participation in local decision-making processes and, on the other, access to economic resources, employment opportunities, and essential services. This choice reflects the need to distinguish between forms of civic agency and material living conditions, which are especially salient in inland territories.

Each capability was then translated into observable constructs through a set of empirical indicators designed to integrate both objective and subjective dimensions of quality of life. Item selection followed theoretical and logical criteria, drawing on the existing literature on multidimensional well-being and quality of life in rural contexts (Anand et al., 2009; Talu, 2009; Casini et al., 2021). The correspondence between capabilities, operational definitions, and survey items is reported in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Theoretical constructs, operational definitions, and corresponding items*

Capability	Description	Questions
<b>1. Life</b>	Lead a fulfilling life free from avoidable deprivations	1–3
<b>2. Bodily Health</b>	Live in good physical and psychological health	4–8
<b>3. Bodily Integrity</b>	Freedom of movement and safety from threats and discrimination	9–12
<b>4. Senses, Imagination, Thought</b>	Access to education, culture, freedom of expression and faith	13–18

<b>5. Emotions</b>	Emotional bonds, belonging, emotional freedom	19–23
<b>6. Practical Reason</b>	Decision-making autonomy and critical reflection on one’s life	24–27
<b>7. Affiliation</b>	Social participation, mutual respect, inclusion	28–35
<b>8. Other Species</b>	Relationship with nature and environmental quality	36–40
<b>9. Play</b>	Participation in recreational and cultural activities	41–42
<b>10a. Control Over One’s Environment – Political</b>	Political participation, civic engagement, and the exercise of individual and collective rights	43–46
<b>10b. Control Over One’s Environment – Material</b>	Access to employment, income opportunities, and essential services	47-50

The questionnaire (available in appendix B) was structured into ten thematic sections, each corresponding to one of Nussbaum’s capabilities, containing between two and six closed-ended questions rated on a five-point Likert scale. Selected open-ended and multiple-choice questions were also included to capture qualitative perceptions. The final section collected socio-demographic data. To avoid priming effects, a global question on quality of life - based on the WHOQOL (1995) definition - was placed at the end of the survey. This item, measured on a five-point Likert scale, served as the dependent variable in the subsequent analyses. A pre-test was conducted with a small, diverse group of respondents to verify clarity, logical coherence, and completion time. After minor adjustments, the survey was administered face-to-face between May and August 2024 by trained interviewers in public spaces across the selected municipalities. Direct administration ensured higher data quality and inclusivity and minimized biases associated with self-completion surveys (Villar &

Fitzgerald, 2017). Following data collection, all questionnaires were subjected to a manual verification process conducted by the author. Each response was reviewed individually to ensure completeness, internal coherence, and consistency in coding across all variables. As data collection was carried out by a professional survey agency through face-to-face administration, no incomplete questionnaires were retained in the final dataset. The dataset was therefore constructed on the basis of fully completed and validated responses, with particular attention to the accuracy of data entry, the standardisation of variable coding, and the alignment between survey items and their corresponding analytical variables. This ensured comparability across respondents and coherence between the theoretical constructs and their empirical operationalisation. This procedure ensured a high level of data quality and minimised potential errors related to transcription, coding, or missing information.

Respondents were invited to assess their satisfaction with their municipality of residence, considering both personal experiences and general living conditions.

Data analysis was performed using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)—via Principal Component Analysis (PCA)—and multiple linear regression. PCA was employed to reduce data dimensionality and identify latent structures, synthesizing the large set of survey items into a smaller number of components that explain most of the observed variance. This approach, widely used in similar studies (Drastichová et al., 2023; Drastichová & Filzmoser, 2019), was essential for reducing the data's dimensionality and verifying the internal consistency of the model before regression analysis. This process provided a preliminary empirical assessment of the coherence of the ten-dimensional framework and its applicability to the Basilicata case study. The resulting components were subsequently used as independent variables in a multiple linear regression model, with the overall QoL perception serving as the dependent variable. This allowed for the quantification of the contribution of each dimension—corresponding to Nussbaum's capabilities—to the overall sense of well-being. This analytical strategy (multiple linear regression), commonly employed in related research on urban and rural quality of life (Komalasari et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2024; Sapena et al., 2021), ensured the robustness and comparability of the results across different contextual dimensions. Variable selection followed a forward stepwise procedure using IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0, with a significance threshold of  $\alpha = 0.05$  (Wang & Chen, 2018).

Given the exploratory purpose of the study, the regression model was interpreted primarily as an analytical tool for identifying the relative association between capability dimensions and perceived quality of life, rather than for establishing causal relationships. Particular attention was paid to the coherence and interpretability of the retained predictors, while acknowledging the well-known sensitivity of stepwise procedures to sample-specific variance.

Although the questionnaire has not yet undergone full psychometric validation, it was conceived as a pilot instrument to test theoretical coherence and practical applicability in complex rural contexts. This exploratory phase aligns with established methodological standards in survey design (Aschbrenner et al., 2022; Malmqvist et al., 2019; Renuse, 2024).

At the same time, its internal structure was preliminarily assessed through exploratory factor analysis, with particular attention to dimensional coherence, item loadings, and sample adequacy indicators. In this sense, the instrument should be understood as a theoretically grounded and empirically tested pilot tool, whose strongest sections display satisfactory structural consistency, while dimensions showing weaker internal coherence are interpreted with greater caution.

Its value lies in initiating a participatory and context-sensitive data collection process, which will serve as a foundation for a future, large-scale validation extending beyond the Basilicata case study.

Overall, the analytical strategy was designed to enhance the robustness of the findings by combining dimensional reduction, internal structure assessment, and multivariate modelling. Greater confidence was attributed to those dimensions that showed satisfactory factorial consistency and retained explanatory power in the regression model, whereas sections characterised by weaker internal coherence were treated as exploratory and interpreted more cautiously.

### **3 Results**

To evaluate whether the proposed ten-dimensional framework—aligned with Nussbaum’s central capabilities—was supported by the empirical data, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was carried out for each questionnaire section, employing Principal Component Analysis (PCA) as the extraction technique.

Sample adequacy was examined through the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett’s test of sphericity. Overall, KMO values met acceptable standards ( $\geq 0.6$ ), indicating that the sample was suitable for factor analysis. The highest KMO value was observed for Control over the material environment (0.852), reflecting strong correlations among items, whereas Practical Reason showed the lowest value (0.500), warranting a more cautious interpretation. Bartlett’s test yielded significant results across all sections ( $p < .001$ ), further confirming the appropriateness of factor extraction (Field, 2013).

Component retention was guided by Kaiser’s criterion (eigenvalues greater than 1) and corroborated by visual inspection of scree plots (reported in the appendix B) (Cattell, 1966). Depending on the section, one to three components were retained, accounting for between 54% and 87% of the total variance. Factor loadings ranged from 0.540 to 0.897, suggesting satisfactory internal consistency among items (Hair et al., 2018). In sections where more than one component emerged,

an oblique Oblimin rotation was applied to account for the conceptual relatedness of the factors (Fabrigar & Wegener, 2012). Items with communalities below 0.20 were removed from the final model (Costello & Osborne, 2005).

As reported in Table 3, several sections—namely Senses, Affiliation, and Play—exhibit robust factorial structures. In particular, Senses accounts for 67.2% of the variance through two components, Affiliation explains 68.6% across three components, and Play explains 70.7% with two components that distinguish between access to and engagement in recreational activities. Bodily Integrity also presents a two-component structure (61.4%), associated with perceived safety and mobility, while Life (65.6%) emerges as a single, well-defined factor. Health is characterized by three components explaining 87.6% of the variance, corresponding to physical and psychological health, future security, and access to healthcare services. Control over one’s material environment, which records the highest KMO value (0.852), explains 75.2% of the variance through two factors related to socio-occupational dimensions. Conversely, Practical Reason (54.0%) and Political Control (54.9%) display lower internal consistency, although they still provide an acceptable level of explanatory power.

**Table 3.** *Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis (PCA)*

<b>Section</b>	<b>KMO</b>	<b>Bartlett's Test (Sig.)</b>	<b>Components &gt;1</b>	<b>%Variance Explained</b>	<b>Total Components</b>
<b>Life</b>	0.61	<.001	1	65.578	3
<b>Bodily Health</b>	0.586	<.001	3	87.557	7
<b>Bodily Integrity</b>	0.723	<.001	2	61.364	6
<b>Senses, Immagination and Thought</b>	0.732	<.001	2	67.197	8
<b>Emotions</b>	0.658	<.001	2	67.224	4
<b>Practical reason</b>	0.5	<.001	1	54.033	3
<b>Affiliation</b>	0.774	<.001	3	68.634	10
<b>Other species</b>	0.73	<.001	1	65.079	5
<b>Play</b>	0.758	<.001	2	70.739	7
<b>Control Over One's Environment – Political</b>	0.668	<.001	1	54.852	4
<b>Control Over One's Environment – Material</b>	0.852	<.001	2	75.201	12

The PCA confirms that the hypothesized structure aligns with the underlying theoretical framework, providing a robust and reliable basis for subsequent regression analysis. The internal coherence of the Life, Health, and Material Control domains indicates a close interrelationship between objective and subjective dimensions of well-being, whereas the multidimensionality

observed within the Affiliation and Senses domains highlights the complex and relational nature of quality of life in rural settings.

To identify the dimensions most strongly associated with perceived QoL, the extracted components were employed as predictors in a multiple linear regression model. A forward stepwise procedure was applied (Wang & Chen, 2018), allowing for the incremental inclusion of variables that made a statistically significant contribution to the model. The dependent variable was the overall QoL score derived from the WHOQOL-inspired item.

The findings (Table 4) are consistent with the theoretical assumptions of the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). The dimension exerting the greatest influence is control over the political environment ( $\beta = 0.171$ ,  $p < .001$ ), underscoring the importance of civic participation and perceived influence over local decision-making processes for individual well-being. This result is in line with empirical evidence demonstrating a positive association between political agency and life satisfaction (Burchardt & Vizard, 2011; Helliwell et al., 2021).

This finding is particularly salient in small rural municipalities, such as those in Basilicata, where close proximity between citizens and institutions facilitates informal communication and participatory practices (Spagnoli, 2022; Romano et al., 2022). In these contexts, residents often experience direct access to policymakers, which enhances trust and fosters a sense of efficacy and inclusion. Consequently, political participation emerges not as an abstract capability, but as a concrete condition for both individual and collective empowerment.

**Table 4.** *Multiple linear regression results*

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standard Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Tolerance	VIF
<b>(Constant)</b>	4.415***	0.021		205.75		
<b>Life</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Bodily Health</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Bodily Integrity</b>	-0.092***	0.023	-0.149	-3.959	0.845	1.183
<b>Senses, Imagination and Thought</b>	0.070**	0.024	0.113	2.872	0.779	1.283
<b>Emotions</b>	0.075***	0.023	0.121	3.234	0.854	1.171
<b>Practical Reason</b>	0.060*	0.023	0.097	2.554	0.843	1.187
<b>Affiliation</b>	-0.078***	0.023	-0.126	-3.389	0.871	1.149
<b>Other Species</b>	-0.050*	0.025	-0.081	-1.998	0.725	1.379
<b>Play</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-

<b>Control Over One's Environment – Political</b>	0.106***	0.026	0.171	4.029	0.668	1.498
<b>Control Over One's Environment – Material</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-

Notes: Significance levels — \*\*\* p < 0.001; \*\* p < 0.01; \* p < 0.05

Additional dimensions that exhibit positive effects are Emotions ( $\beta = 0.121, p = .001$ ), Senses–Imagination–Thought ( $\beta = 0.113, p = .004$ ), and Practical Reason ( $\beta = 0.097, p = .011$ ). These findings emphasize the central role of affective and cognitive capacities—such as emotional bonding, creative activity, and reflective evaluation—in influencing individual well-being. They indicate that quality of life in rural contexts goes beyond material conditions, encompassing the freedom to experience emotions, engage imagination, and exercise reasoning. This perspective is consistent with Nussbaum’s argument that Practical Reason—the ability to critically reflect and plan one’s life—is fundamental to human flourishing, as well as with Self-Determination Theory, which associates autonomy and competence with well-being.

The importance of Emotions and Senses–Imagination–Thought also calls into question conventional stereotypes that depict rural areas as culturally or emotionally deprived. On the contrary, the results suggest that rural settings can provide opportunities for creativity, emotional ties, and intellectual involvement. These conclusions align with research that underscores the relevance of cultural and aesthetic experiences for rural well-being and with critical approaches advocating a reassessment of dominant rural narratives.

By contrast, Bodily Integrity ( $\beta = -0.149, p < .001$ ) and Affiliation ( $\beta = -0.126, p < .001$ ) are significantly and negatively related to quality of life. This highlights how feelings of insecurity and experiences of social exclusion weaken well-being. In the inland areas of Basilicata, a substantial share of respondents reports concerns related to theft (30.6%), wildlife-related incidents (20%), and environmental risks such as floods or earthquakes (18.7%). Such perceptions of vulnerability undermine individuals’ sense of control and stability, thereby limiting their capacity to pursue meaningful life objectives.

From a capability-based standpoint, personal security represents not merely the absence of danger but a prerequisite that enables the exercise of all other freedoms. In a similar vein, Affiliation—the ability to live with and in relation to others—emerges as a foundational component of well-being. When social bonds deteriorate, opportunities for participation and recognition diminish, restricting substantive freedoms and weakening community resilience. Thus, belonging and mutual respect

should be understood not simply as emotional conditions but as essential pillars of rural social cohesion.

Another variable showing a weak yet statistically significant negative association is Other Species ( $\beta = -0.081$ ,  $p = .046$ ). Although this may initially appear paradoxical, it reflects the ambivalent nature of human–environment relationships in rural areas. In Basilicata, rich natural landscapes and wildlife coexist with concerns about property damage, isolation, and potential conflicts. While nature is highly valued symbolically, it may also be perceived as a limitation on economic opportunities and personal autonomy. This ambivalence indicates that environmental quality alone does not necessarily enhance well-being unless it is supported by effective governance and collective management of ecological resources.

The dimensions Life, Bodily Health, Play, and Control Over One’s Environment – Material were omitted from the final multiple linear regression model due to their lack of statistical significance and their limited contribution to explaining perceived quality of life. Specifically, all associated t-values fell below the critical threshold ( $|t| < 1.96$ ), with p-values above 0.05, indicating no statistically significant effects when controlling for other predictors. In addition, partial correlations with the overall quality of life index were weak (all below 0.07), suggesting minimal unique explanatory power. Although diagnostic tests confirmed the absence of multicollinearity, the exclusion of these variables was warranted on both theoretical and statistical grounds. In line with principles of parsimony and empirical rigor, only dimensions displaying meaningful and interpretable relationships with quality of life were retained in the final model.

The adjusted  $R^2$  value of 0.210 indicates that the set of predictors accounts for approximately 21% of the variance in perceived quality of life. While this level of explained variance is moderate, it is consistent with the inherently multidimensional and complex nature of quality of life, which is influenced by numerous unobserved social, cultural, and emotional factors. The relatively limited explanatory power is also attributable to a pronounced ceiling effect in the dependent variable: 94% of respondents selected the two highest satisfaction categories, reflecting a generally positive assessment of life quality despite persistent structural challenges.

Overall, these results suggest that rural quality of life in Basilicata is shaped not only by material and infrastructural conditions but also by relational, emotional, and cultural factors. The ability to participate, imagine, and experience emotions emerges as a crucial determinant of well-being, whereas insecurity, social isolation, and inadequately managed relationships with the natural environment constitute significant constraints. The coexistence of high subjective satisfaction alongside objective limitations—such as restricted access to services, population ageing, and economic vulnerability—illustrates the adaptive resilience of rural communities, which offset

structural deficiencies through social and symbolic resources. In this respect, the empirical evidence challenges reductive portrayals of rural backwardness and underscores the importance of integrated policy approaches that address both the tangible and intangible dimensions of human well-being.

#### **4 Discussion, limitations and future perspectives**

This study provides an original methodological contribution to the empirical analysis of quality of life in rural and inland contexts through the full operationalization of Martha Nussbaum's ten central capabilities within a territorially sensitive framework. Unlike many existing empirical applications—often limited to specific social groups, reduced subsets of capabilities, or predominantly urban settings—this research proposes a comprehensive model adapted to the inland municipalities of Basilicata, classified by the Italian National Strategy for Inland Areas (SNAI) as peripheral and ultra-peripheral. The originality of the contribution lies not in the theoretical elaboration of the Capabilities Approach, which has been extensively discussed in the preceding chapters, but in its systematic empirical translation into a structured and replicable analytical tool.

The proposed approach is distinguished by three main methodological innovations. First, the capabilities are not treated as a purely conceptual reference but are translated into an empirically grounded measurement framework. This process involved the definition of coherent items, the construction of a questionnaire informed by local territorial characteristics, and the application of rigorous quantitative techniques. In this sense, the study addresses one of the most persistent weaknesses of the Capabilities Approach in applied research, namely the difficulty of bridging theoretical elaboration and empirical implementation. Second, the model integrates subjective and objective dimensions of quality of life within a coherent multidimensional structure. This integration is not merely additive but relational: subjective perceptions are conceived as constitutive elements of individual freedoms rather than as ancillary complements to objective indicators. By capturing both measurable living conditions and personal evaluations, the model overcomes the traditional divide between quantitative and qualitative approaches, producing an analytical tool capable of reflecting lived experiences, aspirations, and constraints within rural communities.

Third, the territorialization of the model represents an additional element of innovation (Kato et al., 2022; de Janvry & Sadoulet, 2007). Rather than relying on abstract universalism, the framework is adapted to local contexts through the operational translation of each capability in relation to specific conditions, needs, and resources. The application to Basilicata—selected for its emblematic combination of rural marginality and latent development potential—demonstrates the flexibility of the model, which remains theoretically coherent while achieving empirical relevance. In line with

Haraway's (1988) notion of situated knowledge, the validity of the analytical framework derives precisely from its capacity to interpret universal principles through the lens of contextual realities.

From an empirical perspective, the statistical analyses confirm the robustness of the proposed framework. The Principal Component Analysis (PCA) reveals factorial structures consistent with the ten central capabilities, explaining between 54% and 87% of the variance within each section. The multiple regression analysis identifies control over one's political environment, emotions, practical reason, and senses–imagination–thought as significant positive predictors of perceived quality of life. These findings highlight the centrality of autonomy, self-determination, emotional inclusion, and access to cultural and educational resources as key components of well-being. The emergence of these intangible dimensions in rural contexts—often portrayed as culturally marginal—constitutes a significant counter-narrative to reductionist representations of rurality and aligns with studies emphasizing the role of affective, symbolic, and cultural experiences in shaping well-being, even in peripheral territories (Soini & Dessen, 2016; Cloke, 2006; Shucksmith, 2018).

The systematic application of Nussbaum's (2000; 2011) ten central capabilities to the specific context of Basilicata's inner areas reveals a unique 'hierarchy of well-being' that challenges traditional material-centric assessments. While existing empirical applications often focus on reduced subsets of capabilities (Casini et al., 2021) or predominantly urban settings (Biagi et al., 2018), this study's originality lies in demonstrating that in territorially fragile contexts, the 'weight' of quality of life shifts significantly toward agency and intangible assets. The fact that Control over the Political Environment emerges as the strongest predictor of life satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.171$ ) aligns with evidence suggesting that political agency is a concrete condition for individual and collective empowerment (Burchardt & Vizard, 2011; Helliwell et al., 2021). This finding is particularly salient in small rural municipalities, where close proximity between citizens and institutions facilitates informal communication and a stronger sense of efficacy (Spagnoli, 2022; Romano et al., 2022). Conversely, the non-significance of Material Control in the final model suggests a 'materiality paradox': in areas defined by functional distance from services (Barca et al., 2014), well-being is increasingly shaped by non-material dimensions such as emotional well-being, social belonging, and civic participation (Shucksmith, 2018; Meloni et al., 2023). At first glance, this finding appears counterintuitive: in contexts characterized by structural material deprivation, one would expect material resources—such as income, infrastructure, and services—to be the primary determinants of quality of life. The paradox lies precisely in this tension: material conditions remain structurally constraining, yet they lose explanatory power in shaping perceived well-being. In such contexts, quality of life is less determined by the absolute level of available resources and more by the ways in which individuals are able to interpret, negotiate, and transform these constraints through processes of adaptation, participation,

and social recognition. This evidence confirms that quality of life in inner areas is a relational and political construct rather than a purely economic one, positioning 'immaterial' capabilities as the true pillars of territorial resilience.

Conversely, bodily integrity, affiliation, and other species emerge as significant negative predictors of perceived quality of life. These results suggest that perceived insecurity, social exclusion, and the ambivalent relationship between human communities and the natural environment continue to represent critical challenges in rural contexts. Improving quality of life in inland areas therefore requires policy interventions that go beyond economic or infrastructural investments, prioritizing social cohesion, safety, and ecological coexistence as core objectives of territorial development.

The regression model explains approximately 21% of the variance in perceived quality of life (Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.210$ ). While modest in absolute terms, this level of explanatory power is consistent with the inherently multidimensional and context-dependent nature of quality of life, which is shaped by a wide range of latent factors—including cultural values, interpersonal trust, emotional resilience, and symbolic attachment to place—that are not fully captured through linear statistical models. Rather than representing a limitation, this result provides empirical confirmation of the complexity and heterogeneity of rural well-being and underscores the relevance of mixed-method approaches capable of capturing dimensions that remain partially invisible within purely quantitative analyses.

The coexistence of relatively high subjective quality of life with objective shortcomings, such as limited infrastructure and service provision, supports the notion of adaptive resilience. Rural inhabitants often compensate for structural constraints through social, relational, and symbolic resources (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010; Eurostat, 2024). These findings resonate with the broader literature emphasizing that non-material dimensions—such as emotional well-being, social belonging, and civic participation—play a decisive role in shaping life satisfaction in rural contexts (Soini & Dessein, 2016; Cloke, 2006; Shucksmith, 2018). In this respect, the model demonstrates its capacity to uncover the dynamic interplay between tangible conditions and intangible assets that sustain rural resilience.

From a policy perspective, the results point to the need for an integrated approach to rural development that combines material and immaterial dimensions. Investments in physical infrastructure, including transport, healthcare, and digital connectivity, should be accompanied by measures aimed at strengthening community participation, cultural vitality, and environmental stewardship. Promoting civic engagement, supporting intergenerational exchange, and developing cultural and educational initiatives can enhance both individual capabilities and collective well-being. Moreover, ensuring personal safety and effective management of environmental risks emerges as a

precondition for preserving freedom and dignity, which constitute the normative foundations of the Capabilities Approach.

Despite its contributions, the study presents several limitations that also suggest directions for future research. The questionnaire, although theoretically grounded and inspired by established models (Anand et al., 2009; Talu, 2009), remains exploratory and has not yet undergone full psychometric validation. Extending the survey to larger and more diverse samples will be essential to assess the reliability and generalizability of the model. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design does not allow for the analysis of changes over time or the evaluation of policy impacts (Wang & Cheng, 2020). Future research could adopt longitudinal or panel designs to examine how quality of life evolves in response to public interventions and broader socio-economic transformations. While the application to Basilicata reflects a deliberate focus on marginal inland territories, transferring the model to other national or European contexts will require linguistic and cultural calibration, while preserving theoretical coherence. Methodologically, the limited internal consistency observed for the Practical Reason section highlights the need for semantic refinement to improve clarity and respondent comprehension, with similar adjustments potentially strengthening the overall empirical validity of the instrument.

From an operational standpoint, the model offers the potential to construct a composite index of rural quality of life capable of informing public planning and policy evaluation. Grounded in both objective and subjective indicators, such an index could serve as a practical tool for monitoring equitable and sustainable territorial development. The bottom-up and participatory orientation of the approach enhances the legitimacy of public action and provides a methodological foundation for shared governance and inclusive decision-making processes.

In conclusion, the limitations identified should be interpreted not as constraints but as opportunities for refinement and expansion. The framework proposed here is not limited to the measurement of quality of life but functions as a normative and operational tool for promoting social justice and equitable territorial development. As George Box (1987) famously noted, “all models are wrong, but some are useful.” The usefulness of this model lies in its ability to connect theoretical reflection with empirical application, offering researchers and policymakers an adaptable platform for understanding and improving well-being in rural contexts. By embedding ethical, social, and territorial dimensions within a coherent analytical system, the study contributes to redefining rural development as a process of capabilities expansion, dignity, and freedom—an approach that is both empirically grounded and normatively transformative.

## 5 Conclusions

Building on the theoretical framework outlined in Part I, this chapter has empirically applied a capabilities-based model to the analysis of Quality of Life (QoL) in the inland rural areas of the Basilicata region. By integrating objective and subjective dimensions within a coherent multidimensional structure, the analysis has provided a context-sensitive assessment of the opportunities, constraints, and living conditions that shape perceived well-being in marginal territories.

The empirical findings indicate that the most influential determinants of perceived QoL are not exclusively material in nature, but are strongly associated with relational, cultural, emotional, and decision-making dimensions of everyday life. Individual autonomy, civic participation, emotional inclusion, and access to cultural and educational resources emerge as key enablers of well-being, whereas insecurity, social exclusion, and the fragility of the relationship between human communities and the natural environment constitute significant constraints on the expansion of life opportunities. These results confirm that, in rural and inland contexts, quality of life cannot be adequately interpreted through income levels or infrastructural endowments alone, but rather as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between tangible and intangible factors.

On the basis of these findings, important implications arise for territorial development policies. Improving QoL in inland and marginal areas requires integrated strategies that complement physical investments with social, cultural, and institutional innovation. Strengthening civic participation, promoting conditions of safety and ecological balance, and supporting community-based and intergenerational initiatives appear essential for expanding individual and collective capabilities and for sustaining territorial cohesion. From this perspective, policy approaches should evolve from primarily compensatory interventions toward enabling strategies aimed at unlocking local potential and reinforcing agency at both individual and community levels.

From a methodological standpoint, the study contributes to advancing the empirical applicability of the Capabilities Approach by operationalising Nussbaum's ten central capabilities into a measurement tool that is adaptable to rural contexts. The flexibility and replicability of the proposed model make it suitable for comparative analyses across regions and countries, as well as for the design, monitoring, and evaluation of place-based development policies. Future research could extend this framework through larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and mixed-method approaches combining quantitative robustness with qualitative depth, thereby further refining the model's explanatory and evaluative capacity.

Overall, the proposed model offers an empirically grounded framework for interpreting quality of life in rural and inland areas as the result of the expansion of real opportunities available to individuals

and communities. In this sense, it provides researchers and policymakers with a concrete and adaptable tool for guiding more equitable and sustainable territorial development policies, capable of recognising rural areas not as residual spaces, but as active contexts of resilience, innovation, and collective prosperity.

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## **Chapter 4 – Mapping mayors’ perspectives on quality of life in inner areas: a Q-Methodology study**

### ***Abstract***

The study explores quality of life in the inner areas of Basilicata as a multidimensional and institutionally negotiated construct, examined through the perspectives of mayors. Adopting an exploratory pilot design, it integrates the Capabilities Approach—conceptualising well-being as a set of context-dependent freedoms and opportunities—with Q methodology, which enables the reconstruction of shared configurations of meaning through statement sorting and factor analysis.

The research involved 31 mayors from SNAI-classified “peripheral” and “ultra-peripheral” municipalities, who were asked to rank 24 statements derived from Nussbaum’s capabilities and enriched with contextual elements, followed by in-depth interviews. The analysis (KADE; centroid factor extraction and Varimax rotation) identified five distinct viewpoints on local well-being priorities. Despite their differences, these perspectives converge around a common core: the centrality of essential services, depopulation as a structural threat, security (both social and territorial), and the role of community cohesion. Divergences primarily concern interpretative frames: some mayors emphasise bureaucratic constraints and institutional capacity for action; others depict an overall positive quality of life grounded in safety and social ties; others foreground deficiencies in healthcare, infrastructural isolation, and distance from supra-local policies; while some perspectives stress the importance of inter-municipal cooperation, procedural simplification, and long-term planning.

The findings show that vulnerability is perceived across three interrelated registers—services, socio-environmental territorial management, and governance—and that effective policies should combine service continuity, strengthened administrative capacity, inter-municipal networks, environmental prevention, and opportunities for younger generations. Although not statistically generalisable, the results provide a valuable mapping of institutional representations that can inform more context-sensitive policy design.

## **1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the third empirical study of the thesis and explores the diversity of institutional perspectives on quality of life in inner areas.

While the previous chapters focused on the identification of quality-of-life dimensions and on their measurement from the perspectives of local stakeholders and residents, respectively, this chapter adopts an interpretative approach aimed at analysing the different narratives through which mayors conceptualize quality of life and local development. The analysis builds on the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 1 and on the empirical evidence produced in the preceding chapters, without reintroducing the theoretical background.

The specific objective of the chapter is to identify and interpret shared viewpoints among mayors regarding quality of life in inner areas and to explore how these viewpoints differ across institutional actors. To achieve this aim, Q-methodology is employed as a suitable research strategy for capturing subjective perspectives and systematically mapping configurations of meaning.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, the methodological framework of Q-methodology is introduced and its suitability for the present study is discussed. Second, the research design, data collection, and analytical procedures are described. The chapter then presents and discusses the results, highlighting their implications for the understanding of institutional narratives of quality of life in territorially fragile contexts.

## **2 Reframing theory through Q-methodology**

This study adopts an exploratory pilot research design (Hallingberg et al., 2018; Malmqvist, 2019; Aschbrenner et al., 2022) and follows in the footsteps of studies that, in recent years, have proposed an integrated approach to measuring well-being, combining objective data and subjective perceptions (Voukelatou, 2021; Loveridge et al., 2020; Cannings et al., 2024). This reflects the growing attention to the experiential and contextual dimensions of quality of life, particularly in rural areas, where well-being experiences cannot be fully understood through economic or structural indicators alone (Beltramo et al., 2024; Weckroth et al., 2022). For this reason, this study integrates two complementary theoretical and methodological frameworks: the Capabilities Approach as theoretical foundation and Q methodology as empirical approach.

## 2.1 Q-Methodology

To systematically examine subjective perceptions—namely how social or institutional actors develop coherent interpretations of complex notions such as well-being, development, or regional cohesion (Watts & Stenner, 2012)—this study adopts Q methodology (Stephenson, 1953; Watts & Stenner, 2012). This method integrates the qualitative richness of discourse analysis with the quantitative strength of factor analysis, making it possible to detect shared patterns of meaning across participants (Brown, 1993; Watts & Stenner, 2012). Rather than focusing on isolated opinions, Q methodology examines the configuration of viewpoints, that is, the way individuals' structure and rank their judgments regarding a specific issue (Brown, 1993; van Exel & de Graaf, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2012).

In contrast to conventional surveys or semi-structured interviews, which primarily aim to measure the prevalence or intensity of individual views, Q methodology requires respondents to explicitly position themselves. Its core elements include: (i) a set of statements encompassing the full spectrum of dimensions relevant to opinions on the topic under investigation; (ii) a group of participants who rank these statements and justify their choices, thereby revealing underlying priorities and value judgments; and (iii) a by-person factor analysis that identifies clusters of participants who have ordered the statements in comparable ways, thus highlighting shared discursive perspectives. These perspectives are subsequently interpreted using both quantitative results and qualitative insights.

In the context of this research, Q methodology is particularly well suited. As political and institutional figures, mayors often rely on strategic or diplomatically framed language. The structured nature of this approach compels them to take a clear position by ranking different components of local well-being—such as services, participation, environment, identity, infrastructure, governance, and social cohesion—according to their perceived importance for the quality of life in their municipality. In doing so, it renders explicit their underlying views on local development priorities. This shift enables the analysis to move beyond politically neutral or strategically constructed narratives and to uncover deeper, value-based perspectives. Furthermore, the mixed qualitative–quantitative character of Q methodology (Buchholtz & Vollstedt, 2024) makes it possible to identify perceptual diversity among mayors and relate it to objective indicators, including demographic, economic, and infrastructural factors. This provides a solid empirical foundation for the formulation of policies that are better aligned with local contexts (Forrester et al., 2015). Finally, Q methodology has proven to be an effective tool for examining perceptions of public policies and territorial governance (Davies & Hodge, 2007; Forrester et al., 2015).

## **2.2 Integration of theory and methodology**

The integration of the Capabilities Approach with Q methodology to investigate mayors' perspectives represents a distinctive and innovative contribution to the literature on quality of life in rural contexts, and particularly in inner areas, from both a theoretical and a methodological standpoint. In this framework, Q methodology functions as an empirical operationalization of the Capabilities Approach. Nussbaum's (2011) ten central capabilities have been translated into a set of 20 statements, carefully constructed to capture in a comprehensive manner the different forms of freedom and opportunity that are relevant to the inner areas of Basilicata.

When mayors are asked to rank these statements according to their relevance for quality of life in their municipalities, they are doing more than simply voicing opinions: they are establishing priorities among capabilities. The resulting ranking therefore constitutes an implicit assessment of which freedoms are considered most important or most limited within their territory, rendering their value judgments explicit and converting political and administrative reasoning into the language of effective freedoms.

Through this process, Q methodology acquires both epistemic and practical significance. By engaging in prioritization, mayors reflect on their own scope for action, revealing the interplay between contextual constraints and the potential for local intervention. In this sense, they do not merely articulate political interests but act as producers of knowledge, contributing to a shared understanding of what it means to "live well" in their municipality. By linking empirical investigation with theoretical interpretation, the combined approaches make it possible to elicit a conception of quality of life that emerges not only about the area but from within the area itself, grounded in the experiences and priorities articulated by local representatives.

## **3 Research design**

The study was conducted in three main phases: development of the statement set (section 3.1), data collection (section 3.2) and data analysis and interpretation (section 3.3). To ensure a comprehensive and rigorous description of all phases of the research process, from study design to data collection and analysis, and the presentation of results, the reporting checklist for a Q methodology study proposed by Dieteren et al. (2023) was adopted.

### 3.1 Development of the statement set

The Q-set was developed from a structured concourse combining three sources: (i) Nussbaum's ten central capabilities, (ii) prior interactions with local administrators, and (iii) recent literature on quality of life in rural and inner areas. The statement set was designed to encompass all aspects potentially relevant to opinions on the topic under investigation (Damio, 2016). Relevant dimensions were identified by integrating the capabilities approach with (a) existing research on quality of life and regional policies (Blecic, 2023; Porta et al., 2022; Punziano & Urso, 2016) and (b) notes derived from prior interactions with local administrators. This approach ensured thematic diversity and the inclusion of opposing viewpoints, which is a necessary condition for capturing the plurality of meanings associated with quality of life (Zabala et al., 2018).

The ten capabilities were operationalized into 20 statements formulated in clear and neutral language, tailored to the role of mayors, in order to elicit genuine and comparable reflections across respondents. Given the exploratory nature of this study, this operationalization should be considered a pilot specification developed by the researcher, aimed at testing the applicability of the capabilities framework in the context of inner areas.

The selection followed an iterative theoretical–empirical process guided by explicit criteria, including: (i) conceptual completeness (coverage of all ten capabilities), (ii) contextual relevance to inner areas, (iii) clarity and readability for non-technical respondents, (iv) absence of redundancy, and (v) balanced representation of positive and critical aspects. The screening adopted a deductive–inductive logic that involved eliminating redundancies, reformulating statements in non-technical language, removing negations and double-barrelled items to reduce ambiguity, and verifying territorial specificity (Hensel et al., 2022).

In line with established recommendations (Sudau, Celio & Grêt-Regamey, 2023; Hensel et al., 2022), the preliminary statement set was subjected to cognitive piloting with an expert member of the research team to evaluate comprehensibility, semantic clarity, and cognitive load. The feedback resulted in minor lexical adjustments and the rebalancing of certain capabilities to avoid semantic overlap.

This procedure led to a final Q-set of 24 statements, comprising 20 statements derived from the operationalization of Nussbaum's ten central capabilities and 4 additional statements specifically designed to capture contextual dimensions of quality of life in rural and inner areas, as identified in recent literature (Piras & Pedes, 2025; Shakya & Vagnarelli, 2024; Whitaker, 2024; Cicco et al., 2025; Moliterni et al., 2025) and supported by insights from prior interactions with local administrators. The complete list of the 24 statements is provided in Appendix C.

### 3.2 Data collection

The study considered all 72 municipalities in the Basilicata region classified under the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) 2021–2027. From this group, municipalities categorized as “intermediate” and “centres” were excluded, resulting in a final pool of 59 municipalities identified as “peripheral” and “ultra-peripheral.” The mayors of these municipalities were contacted through their institutional email addresses, and 32 agreed to take part in the study. As one participant withdrew before completing the interview, the final sample consisted of 31 mayors. Participation was entirely voluntary and no incentives were provided. A table reporting the coded sample of participating mayors is included in Appendix C.

Interviews were carried out online via videoconference and had an average duration of approximately 40 minutes. Initially, mayors were asked to sort the 24 statements on a Q-sort grid (reported in Figure 1), which had been sent to them by email prior to the interview. The task involved first reading all the statements and then positioning them on the grid according to their level of agreement, ranging from “most disagree” to “most agree.” More specifically, the Q-sort was performed using a forced quasi-normal distribution with seven columns, ranging from -3 (disagree most) to +3 (agree most), and a fixed number of statements per column (2–3–4–6–4–3–2). The forced distribution required placing only a limited number of statements in the extreme positions and a greater number in the central positions, thereby highlighting the relative importance attributed to each aspect and supporting the identification of value priorities and hierarchies of meaning (Watts & Stenner, 2012; McKeown & Thomas, 2013; Zabala & Pascual, 2016). Once the sorting task was completed, a follow-up interview was conducted to explore the reasons underlying the ranking choices. With participants’ informed consent, the interviews were recorded, and data confidentiality was ensured throughout all phases of the research process.



than conventional variance-maximizing extraction techniques. Rather than prioritizing the maximization of explained variance, the centroid method emphasizes the representation of participants' subjective viewpoints and facilitates the balanced integration of statistical outcomes with qualitative interpretation of factor meaning (Brown, 1980).

In the present study, four centroid factors were extracted. The determination of the number of factors was guided by the joint application of statistical criteria and qualitative judgment, in line with the methodological foundations of Q-methodology (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012). More specifically, factor retention was based on the following criteria: (i) the presence of at least two defining Q-sorts per factor, (ii) clarity and interpretability of the factor structure, (iii) minimization of confounded Q-sorts (i.e., Q-sorts loading significantly on more than one factor), and (iv) statistical robustness as indicated by composite reliability and standard error values.

Two alternative factorial solutions were examined during the analytical process: (a) a four-factor solution and (b) a five-factor solution, the latter recalculated to assess the possible emergence of additional interpretative dimensions. The five-factor solution was characterized by a very low flagging criterion (0.20), which resulted in an increased number of confounded Q-sorts, with participants loading significantly on more than one factor, and a greater degree of overlap among viewpoints. Although all Q-sorts were retained, several exhibited substantial loadings across multiple factors, thereby weakening factorial definition and interpretative differentiation. In contrast, the four-factor solution, based on a more stringent flagging threshold (0.40), yielded more clearly defined and internally coherent factors. Each factor included at least two defining Q-sorts and demonstrated high composite reliability (0.889–0.966) together with low standard error values (0.18–0.33), indicating a stable and interpretatively sound factorial structure. On this basis, the four-factor solution was selected as the most appropriate configuration, as it achieved a more effective balance between statistical robustness and conceptual clarity, whereas the five-factor solution appeared comparatively fragmented and less clearly interpretable.

The retained factors were subsequently subjected to orthogonal Varimax rotation (Kaiser, 1958) to maximize variance between factors and to further enhance the interpretability of the solution. The combined use of the centroid extraction method and orthogonal Varimax rotation—widely advocated in exploratory Q-methodological research (Watts & Stenner, 2012)—facilitated the development of a clear, robust, and interpretable factorial structure. The resulting factors are well differentiated, with individual Q-sorts displaying clearly defined factor loadings (ranging from  $-0.73$  to  $+0.80$ , with significance generally at  $\geq 0.40$ ), allowing for an unambiguous association of participants with specific factors. This procedure also minimized the occurrence of multiple loadings, that is, Q-sorts loading significantly on more than one factor, while maximizing shared variance, thereby improving

the clarity, distinctiveness, and stability of the overall factorial solution (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012; Akhtar-Danesh, 2017).

The significance of factor loadings was calculated according to Brown's (1980) formula, based on the number of statements (N) in the Q-sort:

$$| \text{loading} | \geq \frac{k}{\sqrt{N}}$$

where k represents the constant associated with the desired confidence level (k = 1.96 for p < 0.05; k = 2.58 for p < 0.01) (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012). In the present study, with 24 statements, the resulting threshold is 0.404, corresponding to p < 0.05. All factor loadings with an absolute value  $\geq 0.404$  were considered statistically significant, while those below this threshold were not included in the definition of the factors.

During the analytical phase, Factor 1 was found to exhibit a bipolar configuration, characterized by the presence of two groups of Q-sorts that were strongly intercorrelated but loaded in opposite directions (positive versus negative). Such a structure is well documented in Q-methodological factor analysis and reflects the existence of two contrasting interpretative poles along a single factorial dimension (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012). To appropriately address this bipolarity, the original factor was analytically separated into two autonomous sub-factors, designated as Factor 1a (positive pole) and Factor 1b (negative pole). This methodological decision was retained because both poles demonstrated statistically significant and stable factor loadings: Factor 1a showed positive loadings reaching +0.73 (with three defining Q-sorts), while Factor 1b displayed negative loadings reaching -0.73 (with two defining Q-sorts). Both sub-factors present high composite reliability coefficients (0.923 for Factor 1a and 0.889 for Factor 1b) and low standard errors of measurement (0.277 and 0.333, respectively), supporting the statistical soundness of their differentiation. In the construction of the factor arrays, negatively loading Q-sorts were not discarded but were instead examined independently in order to capture and explicate the bipolar nature of the factor. The decision to treat the two poles of Factor 1 (1a and 1b) as distinct factors is grounded in both theoretical considerations and empirical evidence, as the data clearly indicate the presence of two groups of participants with opposing, well-defined loadings associated with different statement rankings and interpretative orientations. This analytical distinction enables a more accurate and nuanced representation of the diversity of viewpoints within the sample.

Overall, the five extracted factors (1a, 1b, 2, 3, and 4) account for 65% of the total variance. The number of defining Q-sorts associated with each factor—an indicator of factor stability and representativeness—is three for Factor 1a, two for Factor 1b, four for Factor 2, four for Factor 3, and

seven for Factor 4. Taken together, the resulting factorial solution can be considered both balanced and internally coherent.

Factor interpretation followed an integrated analytic strategy that combines quantitative outputs with qualitative interpretation, in line with the epistemological and methodological principles of Q-methodology (Brown, 1993; van Exel & de Graaf, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2012; Zabala et al., 2018; Ramlo, 2024). Factors were construed as coherent constellations of discursive positions, each expressing a distinct viewpoint or orientation. For each factor, the internal interpretative dimensions that define its specific meaning were identified.

Finally, the factor arrays—constructed from the standardized factor scores (z-scores) of the defining Q-sorts—represent the idealized configuration of statement rankings for each factor, thereby outlining the characteristic discursive structure of each emergent perspective. Distinguishing statements, namely those that significantly differentiate one factor from the others, provide critical insight into the underlying values and priorities that define each viewpoint. These elements are examined in depth in the subsequent section, which offers a qualitative interpretation of the perspectives that emerged from the analysis.

#### **4 Results**

Factor analysis conducted using KADE software led to the extraction of 5 factors, which were interpreted and described as five distinct viewpoints among mayors in the inner areas of Basilicata on what is important for local quality of life. In the results, statements are indicated by their statement number and ranking in the factor (e.g., st. 2; +3). For ease of presentation, the five interpretative profiles corresponding to Factor 1a, Factor 1b, Factor 2, Factor 3, and Factor 4 are discussed below as Viewpoints 1 to 5, respectively.

The quotations presented to illustrate the factor interpretations in the Q-methodology analysis were translated from Italian into English.

Table ... provides a synthetic overview of the five viewpoints, including their defining Q-sorts, interpretative labels, and the most salient distinguishing statements used in the subsequent qualitative interpretation.

**Table 1.** *Synthetic overview five viewpoints*

<b>Viewpoint</b>	<b>Label</b>	<b>Defining Q-sorts (n)</b>	<b>Defining mayors</b>	<b>Core interpretation</b>	<b>Key distinguishing statements</b>
1	Administrative pragmatism under structural constraint	3	M_08, M_11, M_21	A critical but constructive view centred on bureaucracy, depopulation, and service fragility, combined with a belief in development through tourism and agriculture if administrative constraints are reduced.	st. 24 (+3), st. 12 (-3), st. 1 (-3), st. 7 (-3*), st. 10 (+2)
2	Everyday liveability and community stability	2	M_04, M_17	A generally positive vision of life in small municipalities, emphasizing safety, social cohesion, and adequate services, while downplaying structural criticalities.	st. 3 (+3), st. 1 (+2), st. 2 (+2), st. 10 (-3*), st. 24 (-3*)
3	Social well-being amid structural fragility	4	M_12, M_13, M_25, M_26, M_29	A balanced perspective combining strong social cohesion and perceived well-being with awareness of healthcare, infrastructural, and institutional fragilities.	st. 3 (+3), st. 9 (+3), st. 1 (-3), st. 4 (-3*), st. 12 (-2)
4	Inter-municipal cooperation and administrative capacity	4	M_05, M_07, M_23, M_28, M_31	A viewpoint centred on administrative effectiveness, simplification, and inter-municipal cooperation as key strategies for sustaining inner areas.	st. 15 (+3*), st. 24 (+2), st. 6 (+2), st. 21 (-3), st. 12 (-2)
5	Service continuity and long-term planning	7	M_02, M_03, M_09, M_18, M_24, M_27, M_30	A perspective focused on maintaining essential services, ensuring local security, and promoting long-term planning, while highlighting structural weaknesses and youth outmigration.	st. 2 (+3), st. 3 (+3), st. 6 (+2), st. 21 (-3), st. 1 (-3), st. 11 (+2*)

Two statements emerged as consensus statements, indicating shared perspectives across all viewpoints. Specifically, statement 18 (“Traditional agriculture and livestock farming must be preserved as cultural and economic heritage”) and statement 23 (“The local community values their traditions and cultural heritage”) did not significantly distinguish between any pair of factors. These results suggest a common recognition among mayors of the importance of cultural heritage and traditional practices as foundational elements of quality of life in inner areas.

#### 4.1 Viewpoint 1: Administrative pragmatism under structural constraint

*Core interpretation:* This viewpoint reflects a critical but constructive perspective centred on bureaucratic rigidity, service fragility, and depopulation, combined with the belief that local development is possible if administrative constraints are reduced.

*Defining Q-sorts:* M\_08, M\_11, M\_21.

*Distinguishing statements:* st. 24 (+3), st. 12 (-3), st. 1 (-3), st. 7 (-3\*), st. 10 (+2).

Viewpoint 1 outlines a strongly pragmatic vision of local administration, where in three elements are central: the difficulty of operating within rigid bureaucratic procedures, the impact of depopulation and the fragility of essential services on the daily lives of communities, and the conviction that certain territorial resources—sustainable tourism and traditional agriculture—can represent levers for development, provided they are supported by more effective administrative tools. This is a critical but constructive viewpoint, which prioritizes the capacity of local institutions to effect real change.

Mayors with this viewpoint think that bureaucracy and administrative procedures represent a significant obstacle in managing resources dedicated to development (st. 24; +3). They describe a system that delays urgent interventions and limits the capacity for action at the local level. The mayor M\_11 observes that *"bureaucracy kills us: a simple electric fence requires five different authorizations"*, while similar frustration comes from M\_08: *"resources would be available, but more freedom and definite timelines are needed to use them"*. This demand for more administrative autonomy is accompanied by a critical perception of supra-local institutional levels, which do not adequately consider territorial specificities (st. 12; -3). Regional and national strategies are often perceived as distant: *"they are imposed from above, without knowing our reality"*, states the mayor M\_11.

These mayors attach great importance to the social and emotional consequences of territorial abandonment (st. 10; +2), viewing it as a phenomenon that profoundly affects community vitality. In parallel, the idea that adequate essential services are fundamental to counter depopulation emerges strongly (st. 2; +2). However, precisely the most crucial services for countering depopulation and fostering quality of life in local communities, like healthcare (st. 1; -3), are perceived as inadequate both in terms of access and continuity of care. *"Waiting times for medical visits are very long, and often there is no clear health point of reference"*, denounces the mayor M\_08. The same issue is perceived with schools (st. 7; -3\*). More than in the other viewpoints, the quality of local education

is considered insufficient. As the M\_11 explains: "*we have a multi-grade class from first to fifth grade: it's difficult to ensure quality education when a single teacher has to follow everyone*".

Alongside these critical issues for community well-being, mayors with this viewpoint acknowledge the presence of potentially strategic –but largely unexploited– opportunities for sustainable local development, such as slow tourism and traditional agriculture. The mayor M\_21 observes that "*we have unique caves and trails, but they are undervalued: with the creation of a network of thematic routes, we could attract visitors all year round*". In this context, infrastructural isolation is considered a problem (st. 6; +1).

In terms of local governance, this viewpoint stands out from the other viewpoints in being more positive about the possibility for citizens to influence political decisions (st. 20; +1\*). Still, these mayors point to a gap between this potential and daily practice: the mayor M\_21 states that "*citizens could participate more, but often prefer to criticize from outside*", while from M\_08 it is added that "*people listen, but struggle to get involved*". The difference with other viewpoints, therefore, appears not to lie in actual civic participation, but in a more open and trusting perspective from these mayors as compared to the others.

#### *4.2 Viewpoint 2: Everyday liveability and community stability*

*Core interpretation:* This viewpoint presents a generally positive vision of life in small municipalities, emphasizing safety, social cohesion, and adequate services, while downplaying structural criticalities.

*Defining Q-sorts:* M\_04, M\_17.

*Distinguishing statements:* st. 3 (+3), st. 1 (+2), st. 2 (+2), st. 10 (–3\*), st. 24 (–3\*).

This viewpoint, somewhat contrary to the previous viewpoint, presents an overall positive vision of quality of life in small municipalities. Daily life is described as stable, safe, and supported by a strong community fabric, where basic services—particularly healthcare—are perceived as adequate for local needs. While acknowledging some structural criticalities typical of inner areas, this viewpoint interprets living in small towns as a satisfactory experience.

In this viewpoint the most prominent theme concerns public safety, which mayors attribute to strong social cohesion and low crime rates (st. 3; +3). The mayors' words make this lived experience evident: as the mayor M\_04 observes, "*crime rates are low because we all know each other; if a child gets lost in a village, you find them after three seconds*". Even for mayors who load onto viewpoint 2, while not a top priority, the presence of a good level of local essential services is considered

essential (st. 2; +2); indeed, this is accompanied by a positive evaluation of local healthcare services, considered functional and capable of providing adequate coverage for residents (st. 1; +2). The mayor M\_17 confirms the positive perception of local healthcare: "*local healthcare works well, we have two public family doctors, a pediatrician, and soon a (local) Community Health Center*". Finally, a moderately positive evaluation concerns the availability of recreational opportunities for different age groups (st. 19; +1\*), which completes the picture of daily life perceived as satisfactory and not marked by social isolation. This appreciation aligns with the favorable perception of daily well-being (st. 9; +1), further contributing to the representation of balanced communities where stability largely derives from the density of social relationships.

Alongside these clearly positive aspects, the mayors associated with Viewpoint 2 approach local criticalities with an attitude marked by pragmatism and a general tendency to resize their significance. They indeed express a clear rejection of the idea that depopulation generates a significant emotional impact on residents (st. 10; -3\*). The phenomenon is acknowledged but interpreted as an operational problem to be managed, rather than a source of emotional concern. Similarly, mayors do not consider the reduction of bureaucratic constraints a priority (st. 24; -3\*), showing a certain distance from the rhetoric of administrative simplification as an essential condition for local development. As the mayor M\_17 observes: "*the goal is not to completely eliminate constraints; above all, we must think about two or three fundamental things: transport, infrastructure, and healthcare*". Also distinctive is the position regarding the lesser relevance attributed to long-term political planning (st. 11; -2\*), which suggests a pragmatic orientation, focused on the concrete and immediate needs of the community.

Finally, in terms of the relationship with the environment, a critical, but not emergency-driven, perception of the impact of wildlife emerges (st. 5; -2). The problem is acknowledged, but treated as a difficulty to be managed rather than a threat. It is noted as a growing criticality, capable of affecting daily life and the perception of security, but without assuming emergency tones. "*We bought cages for wild boars, but the problem remains*" explains the mayor M\_17, highlighting the limited effectiveness of available solutions. The natural environment is not perceived in adversarial terms, but as an identity-defining element to be preserved. Mayor M\_04 state: "*The environment is everything, it must be preserved. By this, I don't mean I'm against alternative energy, but wind turbines shouldn't be placed above waterfalls*", showing a balance between landscape protection and the possibility of innovation. This vision also shows how sustainability is understood as an adaptation to the characteristics and needs of the territory, rather than the application of globally imposed models or principles.

### 4.3 Viewpoint 3 Social: well-being amid structural fragility

*Core interpretation:* This viewpoint combines strong social cohesion and perceived well-being with a clear awareness of healthcare, infrastructural, and institutional fragilities.

*Defining Q-sorts:* M\_12, M\_13, M\_25, M\_26, M\_29.

*Distinguishing statements:* st. 3 (+3), st. 9 (+3), st. 1 (-3), st. 4 (-3\*), st. 12 (-2).

Viewpoint 3 offers a balanced interpretation of life in inner areas, where perceived safety, community bonds, and forms of local solidarity continue to play a significant daily role, though this does not translate into an overall positive assessment. This perspective, while acknowledging the strength of social capital and a widespread sense of well-being, is accompanied by a clear awareness of the territory's structural fragilities.

Regarding social cohesion and perceived quality of life, viewpoint 3 highlights a strongly positive perception of daily life in small municipalities. These contexts are described as particularly safe, with a very low perceived crime rate (st. 3; +3), and inhabited by communities generally satisfied with their lives (st. 9; +3). The social climate appears serene, cohesive, and characterized by close relationships that reinforce perceived well-being. As the mayor M\_12 states, "*in our territory, we live on a happy island between Puglia, Campania, Calabria... I think it's due to the way my fellow citizens are, very simple*"<sup>1</sup>. The mayor M\_25 also confirms this picture: "*we have a low crime rate, and this increases the quality of life*". In this "happy" perspective, even the local school system is positively evaluated (st. 7; +2), despite geographical marginality. The school represents a fundamental safeguard for the community, a place where "*a place where you can grow well*", as one administrator observes, and an element that contributes to maintaining ties and continuity in smaller communities.

Alongside its strengths, this viewpoint recognizes a set of significant limitations, especially structural fragilities and institutional detachment. Local healthcare services are perceived as insufficient (st. 1; -3) and often unable to meet the daily needs of the elderly population. The mayor M\_26 clearly highlights this: "*We are substituting the Local Health Authority... twice a month we collect blood samples for all citizens, at our own expense, to guarantee this service which elderly people would otherwise not receive*". The quality of the local road network (st. 6; -2), is perceived as an element that accentuates isolation and makes access to services difficult, especially for the most

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<sup>1</sup> The reference to Puglia, Campania, and Calabria is used to highlight that Basilicata—despite being geographically situated between three regions often associated with organized crime—does not exhibit the same level of criminal presence. The idea of Basilicata as a “happy island” therefore reflects a widely shared perception that aligns, to a large extent, with the reality of the territory. However, this representation remains a stereotype: it simplifies a complex situation and risks creating rigid contrasts between regions, overlooking the diversity of local experiences and dynamics.

vulnerable segments. From an institutional perspective, a widespread sense of detachment from regional and national policies emerges (st. 12; -2), which are considered insensitive to the specific needs of inner areas. The mayor M\_25 emphasizes: "*regional decisions do not follow the indications of inner areas... a Minister said we must be accompanied to a slow death*". Similarly, the mayor M\_12 observes that "*many calls for public tenders come from above... completely different realities, so they cannot understand the needs of the local area*". Within this framework, depopulation (st. 10; -1\*) is described as a process that progressively compromises the socio-economic sustainability of these territories. The lack of qualified job opportunities (st. 19; -2), recreational activities capable of retaining different age groups (st. 21; -1), and structural criticalities that accentuate isolation are considered the main causes of population loss. The mayor M\_26 points out: "*there are not many opportunities... but we have requests for welders and skilled workers that we don't have in the territory*". The mayor M\_12 adds: "*the quality of life is good, but if there were more opportunities, especially for young people, they would not leave*". The issue of flexibility in the use of funds for local development is also present, albeit moderately (st. 24; -1\*), as a need for greater administrative autonomy.

Finally, with regard to the relationship with the environment, the mayors of viewpoint 3 reveals an ambivalent stance. On one hand, the risk of hydrogeological instability is perceived as high and structural (st. 4; -3\*). The mayor M\_25 states that "*the risk of natural disasters is high*", while from M\_12, the need for preventive interventions is emphasized: "*in my municipality, I have five landslides in five locations... we need to invest in prevention; often we have diverted natural water or closed springs to remedy problems, but then after a few years, disaster strikes*". Alongside this vulnerability, on the other hand, the natural environment is experienced daily as familiar and harmonious. The low perception of risk stemming from wildlife (st. 5; +2\*) suggests an established relationship with the local ecosystem. The mayor M\_12 summarizes it thus: "*we live in nature; we are accustomed to coexisting... it often also represents a tourist element*". Following this awareness, even recent criticalities, such as the increase in wild boars, are interpreted as consequences of anthropogenic imbalances rather than a natural threat: "*wild boars have become numerous, but it's an un-natural thing induced by humans*"(M\_13). In this context, agriculture and animal husbandry play a crucial role in land maintenance, configuring themselves not only as economic activities but as elements of oversight and ecological safeguard. The mayor M\_29 states that farmers are "*individuals who monitor the territory... they are lookouts for fires*", and that the presence of animals contributes to biodiversity and the stability of the local ecosystem.

#### 4.4 Viewpoint 4: Inter-municipal cooperation and administrative capacity

*Core interpretation:* This viewpoint emphasizes administrative effectiveness, simplification, and inter-municipal cooperation as key strategies for sustaining inner areas.

*Defining Q-sorts:* M\_05, M\_07, M\_23, M\_28, M\_31.

*Distinguishing statements:* st. 15 (+3\*), st. 24 (+2), st. 6 (+2), st. 21 (-3), st. 12 (-2).

Viewpoint 4 expresses a vision strongly oriented towards administrative capacity and inter-municipal collaboration as indispensable conditions for the future of inner areas. Mayors who share this perspective describe territories that, despite generally adequate local services, remain exposed to environmental fragilities, infrastructural isolation, and limited opportunities for younger generations. The resilience of these communities, according to this viewpoint, depends on the ability to work together, simplify procedures, and address territorial risks systemically.

Regarding the management of the territory, central in this viewpoint is the conviction that the challenges of inner areas cannot be tackled by a single municipality but require a higher level of institutional coordination. In particular, the inter-municipal cooperation (st.15; +3\*) represents the most defining element of this profile: sharing functions, resources, and strategies is considered an obligatory step to compensate for small administrative size and territorial dispersion. As the mayor M\_05 emphasizes, "*collaboration between municipalities is essential to maintain services like water, transport, schools, and essential shops in inner areas*". From this perspective, networking is not an additional option, but the "*way of operating for the future*" to continue guaranteeing basic services even to the smallest municipalities (M\_05). This strong focus on cooperation is closely connected to the demand for administrative simplification (st.24; +2), perceived as a necessary condition to effectively utilize available funds and accelerate interventions. In this perspective, local administrations aspire to greater managerial flexibility, allowing them to act promptly and in coordination. The mayor M\_31 describes new digital compliances as an additional burden, observing that "*all these steps, the digital signature, digital identity (SPID)<sup>2</sup>, are an additional problem; paper might have been better*". Similarly, the mayor M\_23 highlights how the "*volume of documentation, authorizations*" ends up discouraging citizens and businesses, blocking initiatives that could retain population and investments in the territory.

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<sup>2</sup> The Italian Public Digital Identity System (SPID) is a national digital authentication system that allows citizens and businesses to access online public services through a single, secure set of credentials. It provides standardized, legally recognized digital identification across government platforms and accredited private services.

This demand for a more agile and coordinated management structure is deeply rooted in the need to protect a local service system that, despite everything, is perceived as functioning generally well. Indeed, both healthcare (st.1; +1) and schooling (st.7; +1) are evaluated in moderately positive terms, as is the role of tourism for economic development (st.22; +1). In several cases, mayors assert the quality of local educational provision: the mayor M\_07 states that the town's school, despite the challenges of multi-grade classes, "*school provides a solid foundation and a good level of preparation for successfully progressing through the subsequent years*". Similarly, the mayor M\_28 describes the school building as "*a beautiful, very colorful school, with all environments compliant*", the result of investments that have transformed it into a cutting-edge facility. Communities are not perceived as lacking essential infrastructure, but as contexts where a local welfare network exists that needs to be protected and strengthened. Precisely for this reason, depopulation is interpreted both as a risk to the future sustainability of services and as a source of emotional stress for those who remain (st.10; +1\*). Population loss affects not only the economy but also the quality of life and the sense of security of those living in these territories. The mayor M\_31 emphasizes that depopulation "*has a negative impact on those who remain*", fuelling a "*repetitive, continuous mantra of 'there's nothing, nothing can be done'*" which affects the psychological well-being of the population. Even where the quality of personal life is perceived as good, as the mayor M\_05 observes ("*I personally live well here with my family*"), specific "*difficulties*" nonetheless emerge for young and old, especially in terms of opportunities and access to services.

In this regard, the absence of adequate economic opportunities for young people (st.21; -3) emerges as one of the main threats to the vitality of inner areas. The mayor M\_31 answers the question about job opportunities with an "*absolutely not*," explaining that, to stop young people from leaving, "*an economic, social, and labor plan is necessary [...] from the Region [...] in agreement with the central Government*". Similarly, the mayor M\_07 notes that in his municipality "*there is no kind of opportunity for young people, who 'are forced to emigrate'*" and, once graduated, "*almost all [...] never return*". Even in the presence of local potential—tourism, traditional agriculture, cultural heritage—the difficulty of creating stable and qualified jobs represents a critical issue that makes the future of these territories uncertain. The mayor M\_05 recounts having used ministerial funds to stimulate the opening of essential activities and having created a dedicated youth desk, but acknowledges that the opportunities "*are absolutely not sufficient, young people have no other choice but to leave the territory*". This condition is compounded by the perception that regional and national policies do not sufficiently consider the needs of inner municipalities (st.12; -2), in conjunction with the presence of excessive constraints on the use of funds for local development. The mayor M\_23 denounces "*too many constraints on the use of inner area funds*" and emphasizes that lawmakers do

not consult “the greatest connoisseurs of their territory, i.e. local administrators”. These elements strengthen a sense of institutional marginality that directly affects the capacity of territories to create opportunities for younger generations.

This perception of marginality extends beyond the socio-economic sphere to the structural fragility, where the awareness of territorial risks characterizes inner areas. The quality of roads and infrastructural isolation (st.6; +2) are perceived as factors that particularly expose the most vulnerable people, while the risk of landslides, floods, and instability is not minimized at all (st.4; –1). The mayor M\_05 states that hydrogeological risk “is one of the problems to be addressed” both locally and nationally, recalling landslides and damage to road and housing infrastructure. The mayor M\_23 describes an even more pronounced picture, speaking of “severe hydrogeological instability” and warning that “if we are not careful, one morning we will find ourselves in the river”. These environmental vulnerabilities intersect with a pronounced concern regarding wildlife, considered a real and growing problem for the daily safety of residents (st.5; –3). M\_23 reports that “we have wild boars everywhere” and that sightings occur “even among the houses in the village”, to the point that the situation is “completely out of control”. The mayor M\_31, on the other hand, highlights the increasing number of “accidents due to wild boars” and damaged vineyards, emphasizing that the risk is very low for people but “very high” for crops, vehicles, and property. In this context, safety is understood broadly: not only public order, but protection from environmental and territorial dangers that can isolate or harm communities as a whole.

#### 4.5 Viewpoint: 5 Service continuity and long-term planning

*Core interpretation:* This viewpoint focuses on maintaining essential services, ensuring local security, and promoting long-term planning, while highlighting structural weaknesses and youth outmigration.

*Defining Q-sorts:* M\_02, M\_03, M\_09, M\_18, M\_24, M\_27, M\_30.

*Distinguishing statements:* st. 2 (+3), st. 3 (+3), st. 6 (+2), st. 21 (–3), st. 1 (–3), st. 11 (+2\*).

Viewpoint 5 expresses a perspective that centers on quality of life based on the continuity of essential services, local security, and administrative planning capable of looking to the long term, beyond immediate emergencies. Administrators who identify with this vision describe territories that maintain a delicate balance, supported by minimal infrastructure.

The stable presence of essential services—such as water, electricity, transport, schools, and shops—is perceived as indispensable for the daily lives of residents (st. 2; +3). Mayors emphasize

how precisely these basic services allow the community to maintain stability and autonomy, as they represent the boundary between the possibility of staying and the necessity of leaving. As the mayor M\_03 observes, *"to be able to live even in small realities, basic services are essential... where they are lacking, it becomes difficult to stay"*. While material aspects provide the foundation for residency, the perceived serenity of the community plays an equally pivotal role. At this regard, a strong sense of local security reinforces this perception of quality of life, representing an identifying trait of these territories. They are described as protected places, characterized by low crime rates (st. 3; +3), where a widespread trust persists among residents. The mayor M\_27 summarizes this perception: *"crime hardly exists here anymore... we still leave our cars unlocked and the keys in the front door"*.

However, this reassuring social atmosphere stands in stark contrast to the material reality of the territory, creating a paradox where residents feel socially protected but structurally abandoned. Indeed, mayors who share this viewpoint highlights various criticalities related to local services and infrastructure. Infrastructural isolation, primarily linked to road quality, emerges as a problem that contributes to making daily balance more fragile (st. 6; +2). The mayor M\_18 emphasizes that *"some roads are in poor condition, and in some areas, they are even severely damaged"*, with consequences that become particularly burdensome for the elderly and vulnerable people. Local healthcare services are also negatively evaluated, considered insufficient compared to the needs of the population (st. 1; -3). The mayor M\_30 recalls that *"we have big health problems... ambulances often arrive without a doctor on board"*, while the mayor M\_09 stresses that *"in a community of elderly people, the doctor is the beacon"*, but it is difficult to guarantee their presence. A further distinctive criticality is the quality of local schools, which also receives negative judgments (st. 7; -2\*), configuring itself as an area of strong vulnerability. Even in municipalities where the service is still maintained, as the mayor M\_09 recounts referring to a kindergarten with only two children, the school appears as a fragile outpost, constantly on the brink. Finally, environmental vulnerability is recognized (st. 4; -1), but it does not occupy a central position as an immediate physical risk; rather, it is a concern linked to the future compromise of territorial balance if other fragilities are not addressed first.

Closely connected to the fragility above mentioned, depopulation emerges as a grave concern in this viewpoint. It is considered both a consequence of the difficulty in maintaining services and a cause of their further weakening (st. 10; +2), profoundly impacting collective well-being and the demographic resilience of the territory. In this viewpoint, in fact, essential services and demographic dynamics are part of a self-perpetuating vicious cycle: without services, the population decreases, and with less population, it becomes difficult to maintain services. As the mayor M\_24 states, *"when a soul leaves... a way of comparison, of creating employment and development for the entire territory, is lost"*, indicating that the loss of residents simultaneously reduces social cohesion and development

possibilities. Alongside this, the lack of economic and professional opportunities for young people represents the strongest criticality (st. 21; -3), and is a key factor fueling depopulation. The mayor M\_30 emphasizes that *"more than 90% of young people who go to study outside never return"*, while the mayor M\_03 speaks of the need to *"strengthen economic opportunities for younger people"*, as many find no reasons to stay. The weakness of cultural and recreational offerings (st. 8; -2; st. 19; -1) also contributes to this scenario, making these places less attractive not only for families and younger residents, but also for older ones. The mayor M\_27 highlights the need to *"create leisure for over 50s"* and to have meeting places, while the mayor M\_18 emphasizes that *"there are no spaces where the elderly can meet and make a conversation"*.

In this context of challenges and fragilities, the ability to plan in the medium-long term takes on particular importance (st. 11; +2\*), configuring itself as a distinctive element of this viewpoint. Administrators who share this perspective believe that securing a future for these territories requires stable and lasting strategies, rather than episodic or emergency interventions. As the mayor M\_27 states, *"we are planning actions that will yield results in four or five years... it takes time to create an economy"*. This is naturally accompanied by a marked sensitivity towards the need to simplify administrative processes (st. 24; +1\*). This simplification is considered useful for governing intrinsically fragile territories with greater effectiveness and fewer bureaucratic obstacles. The mayor M\_09 clearly describes this difficulty: *"the mayor is now a bureaucrat... we are submerged in paperwork and compliances"*, highlighting how bureaucracy can significantly slow down the implementation of essential interventions and the realization of long-term development strategies.

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 Main considerations**

The analysis of the Q-sorts collected from mayors of municipalities located in the inner areas of the Basilicata region reveals five distinct perspectives on quality of life. Despite differences in administrative sensibilities and political priorities, these perspectives converge around a shared core of issues: the sustainability of essential services, depopulation as a structural threat, security (understood both as low crime rates and protection from environmental risks), and the strength—or fragility—of social cohesion. This common ground represents the starting point from which divergent interpretations of quality of life in inner areas unfold, in line with studies describing these territories as systems simultaneously shaped by structural constraints and place-based resources (Barca et al., 2018; OECD, 2018, 2020; ISTAT, 2022; Blečić, 2023).

Differences among perspectives do not primarily concern the acknowledgment of critical issues, but rather the ways in which these issues are interpreted and prioritized. A first dividing line separates interpretations that tend to normalize local vulnerabilities—recognizing them while reframing them through the lens of strong interpersonal relations and community life—from those that adopt a more problematizing logic, reading the same elements as signals of systemic threats. A second axis of differentiation concerns the institutional dimension: in some viewpoints, bureaucracy and procedural constraints emerge as the main obstacle to local action; in others, the issue is broader and relates to governance models and the capacity for inter-municipal cooperation; elsewhere, institutional constraints remain in the background compared to the day-to-day management of local problems. The scale at which territorial vulnerability is interpreted also varies: some perspectives emphasize environmental and infrastructural issues (hydrogeological risks, wildlife management, mobility), others privilege socio-demographic dynamics, while others focus primarily on institutional factors. Finally, depopulation assumes different meanings: for some viewpoints it represents the key lens through which the future of the territory is interpreted; for others, it is seen as the outcome of a mismatch between supra-local policies and actual needs; for others still, it is understood as a mainly administrative issue, compatible with an overall positive narrative of community life (Lucatelli & Monaco, 2018; Barca & Terribile, 2019; Coppola, 2022, 2023).

Overall, the perspectives identified do not lie along a simple continuum of greater or lesser optimism. Rather, they articulate distinct interpretive logics through which local administrators assign meaning to the same empirical elements. The observed divergences therefore depend more on cognitive and value-based frameworks—that is, on what is considered most relevant, threatening, or strategic—than on the evaluation of individual dimensions per se. From this perspective, quality of life emerges as a socially and institutionally mediated construct, confirming that policies targeting inner areas must address not only material problems but also differentiated territorial representations and local priorities (Forrester et al., 2015; Ansell & Torfing, 2021).

## **5.2 Theoretical implications**

The main theoretical contribution of these findings, within the framework of this dissertation, lies in making visible the plurality of institutional interpretations of quality of life. Under similar territorial constraints, mayors construct different hierarchies of priorities and interpretative frames. The use of Q methodology enables the systematic reconstruction of these configurations of meaning, highlighting how quality of life is a territorially situated phenomenon mediated by administrative

action, in line with approaches that emphasize the contextual and processual nature of well-being (Robeyns, 2011; Weckroth et al., 2022; Beltramo et al., 2024; Mantino et al., 2022).

A first interpretive outcome concerns the coexistence—widely discussed in the literature—of structural fragilities and relational resources. On the one hand, mayors highlight issues related to service retrenchment, depopulation, and geographic marginality, consistent with studies portraying inner areas as territories shaped by long-term structural imbalances (Collantes & Pinilla, 2014; Bernard & Šimon, 2017; Fabbicatti et al., 2022). On the other hand, they describe contexts characterized by perceived safety, interpersonal trust, and strong neighborly relations, confirming that in rural and peripheral areas quality of life cannot be reduced to a mere “deficit” relative to urban settings (Bertolini et al., 2017, 2019; Zarecor et al., 2021; Beltramo et al., 2024). What emerges most clearly, however, is how this tension is translated into different administrative narratives: in some viewpoints, social cohesion functions as a compensatory factor, while in others it is deemed insufficient to counter vulnerabilities perceived as systemic.

A second theoretically relevant result is the articulation of vulnerability into three distinct registers, as perceived by local administrators:

- I. service vulnerability, linked to healthcare, education, transport, and access to essential services, reflecting the centrality attributed to citizenship services in place-based policies (Barca & Terribile, 2019; Blečić, 2023; OECD, 2020);
- II. environmental and territorial stewardship vulnerability, related to hydrogeological risk, diffuse maintenance, wildlife management, and the care of natural capital, consistent with analyses referring to a socio-environmental crisis in inner areas driven by abandonment and underuse (Carrosio, 2020; Viccaro et al., 2021; Ferretti et al., 2022);
- III. governance vulnerability, encompassing bureaucratic constraints, limited administrative capacity, perceived distance from regional and national policies, and the need for inter-municipal cooperation, in line with the literature on multilevel governance and institutional capacity in fragile contexts (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose & Tomaney, 2016; van Popering-Verkerk et al., 2022).

This articulation suggests that, from an institutional perspective, fragility is not a unitary phenomenon but a multidimensional construct that intertwines material infrastructure, natural capital, and institutional capital, and can be interpreted as a configuration of territorial unfreedoms constraining the exercise of substantive freedoms not only for individuals, but also for institutions and socio-ecological systems (Sen, 1999).

A further theoretical implication concerns the role of mayors as boundary actors between local communities and supra-local institutional levels. In continuity with studies on the National Strategy

for Inner Areas and on territorial leadership (Lucatelli & Monaco, 2018; Lucatelli et al., 2019; Beer et al., 2021; Sabbi, 2023), the findings show that mayors are not merely policy implementers but producers of territorial interpretations and mediators between local needs and policy frameworks. Differences among viewpoints indicate that this mediating role can take different forms: oriented toward pragmatic day-to-day management, toward claims for greater administrative autonomy, or toward the construction of cooperative networks and inter-municipal alliances.

Overall, the study confirms that inner areas are not simply fragile spaces, but complex systems in which well-being, vulnerability, and institutional capacity are deeply intertwined, and in which the interpretive work of local decision-makers plays a crucial role in shaping—or filtering—the translation of territorial priorities into public action.

### **5.3 Limitations and future implications**

As the analysis is based on a limited number of mayors and on a single regional context, the findings should be interpreted as a mapping of dominant configurations of meaning rather than as a statistically generalizable distribution. Moreover, the exclusive focus on the institutional perspective highlights the need to compare these interpretations with the perceptions of residents and other local actors, in order to assess convergences and potential misalignments between administrative priorities and everyday lived experiences—a dimension that is explored in subsequent chapters.

Future research could replicate the study in other regional or national contexts to assess the transferability of the identified configurations, as well as integrate Q methodology with quantitative indicators and the direct involvement of citizens, young people, and local economic actors. A longitudinal approach would further allow the observation of how external shocks or the implementation of specific policies (such as the SNAI and the PNRR) reshape perceptions of vulnerability and institutional priorities over time.

### **5.4 Policy implications**

The perspectives identified make it possible to translate priorities into operational insights from the viewpoint of local administrators. Across all viewpoints, the sustainability of essential services emerges as a minimum condition for territorial viability and as a key lever to counter depopulation; however, the policy levers considered most decisive differ. In some perspectives, there is a strong emphasis on the need for procedural simplification and greater administrative autonomy to ensure the effective use of available resources; in others, inter-municipal cooperation is seen as a prerequisite for guaranteeing continuity and efficiency in service provision; in others still, environmental prevention and territorial maintenance are conceived as structural policy domains rather than as responses to exceptional events.

Across perspectives, the generational dimension—understood as the availability of educational, professional, and cultural opportunities for young people—emerges as a key factor linking quality of life and demographic resilience. Furthermore, several narratives point to the need to strengthen trust and civic participation, also as a response to the perceived distance between local communities and supra-local decision-making levels. Taken together, these implications outline a policy agenda that, in the representations of mayors, combines services, administrative capacity, institutional cooperation, environmental prevention, and community capital as essential conditions for sustaining livability and inclusive development in inner areas.

## **6 Conclusions**

The analysis of mayors' perspectives through this pilot study highlights that quality of life in inner areas cannot be interpreted as a uniform or univocally defined condition. Rather, a complex picture emerges, in which divergent priorities, structural constraints, and latent resources intertwine, giving rise to different interpretations of territorial fragility. Quality of life thus appears as a field of tensions, within which local administrative action is continuously confronted with institutional limitations, demographic dynamics, and community expectations.

The mayors' narratives reveal the existence of multiple interpretative configurations of the condition of inner areas. In some cases, fragility is primarily understood through the lens of institutional and bureaucratic constraints, perceived as significant obstacles to local intervention capacity. In others, attention is focused on the resilience of social capital, public safety, and community cohesion, which are considered fundamental components of everyday well-being despite infrastructural shortcomings. Further perspectives emphasize the need for innovation in territorial governance and for forms of inter-municipal cooperation as key levers to overcome administrative isolation. Alongside these readings, more critical views emerge, highlighting a vicious cycle between the erosion of essential services and depopulation, interpreted as a direct threat to the very survival of local communities.

Taken together, these perspectives contribute to overcoming representations of inner areas based exclusively on a deficit-oriented logic. Inner areas instead emerge as “fragile yet cohesive” systems, in which profound structural vulnerabilities—related to access to services, infrastructure, and territorial management—coexist with high levels of relational well-being, perceived safety, and environmental quality. Territorial vulnerability thus takes on a multidimensional configuration, which can be traced to at least three interconnected domains: service vulnerability, environmental vulnerability, and governance vulnerability. The possibility of “living well” in these contexts depends

on the balance between material resources and immaterial resources, such as trust, administrative capacity, and the quality of social relations.

From a public policy perspective, the mayors' narratives highlight the limitations of standardized, top-down interventions. The priorities expressed outline a clear agenda: infrastructural investments, while necessary, are insufficient if not accompanied by processes of administrative simplification, more flexible governance models, and policies aimed at retaining and attracting human capital, particularly younger generations. Moreover, the attention devoted to territorial stewardship indicates that inner areas should not be considered merely as spaces of landscape value, but as active contexts of environmental stewardship, playing a fundamental role in the prevention of hydrogeological risk and the protection of biodiversity.

Within this framework, the role of mayors emerges as particularly significant. They can be understood as genuine boundary actors, tasked with interpreting heterogeneous local needs and mediating between external constraints and internal possibilities for action. Their capacity to translate community demands into operational choices represents a crucial resource for the social and institutional resilience of inner areas. Integrating these subjective perspectives into decision-making processes is not merely a cognitive exercise, but a necessary condition for ensuring that development strategies are not only technically effective, but also politically feasible and socially sustainable.

Overall, the findings indicate that the future of inner areas largely depends on the ability of public policies to align with locally expressed priorities. Quality of life, as interpreted by local administrators, rests on a delicate balance between services, social relations, environmental conditions, and territorial governance capacity. This interpretative framework provides an essential basis for comparison with residents' perceptions, enabling a deeper exploration of convergences and divergences between institutional visions and everyday lived experiences in the subsequent chapters.

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## **PART III - FINAL OUTLOOK**

### **Chapter 5 – Quality of life as a territorial process: summary and conclusions**

#### *Abstract*

Chapter 5 synthesizes the dissertation’s findings and frames quality of life in Italian inner areas as a relational, place-based process rather than a purely material condition. Integrating the three empirical studies within the Capabilities Approach, the chapter shows how well-being emerges from the interaction between persistent structural constraints and immaterial dimensions such as agency, participation, and meaning-making, giving rise to a “materiality paradox” in contexts of long-term deprivation.

The chapter also emphasizes the role of collective action and local governance in mediating the relationship between territorial resources, services, and perceived quality of life. By contrasting residents’ experiences with institutional narratives, it derives policy implications that call for place-based strategies combining service provision with the strengthening of local agency, while acknowledging the study’s limitations and outlining directions for future research.

#### **1 Cross-cutting synthesis of results**

This dissertation has addressed the issue of quality of life in Italian inner areas through an integrated theoretical, methodological, and empirical perspective, grounded in the Capabilities Approach and articulated through a multi-method and sequential research design. The aim was not to provide a point-based measurement of well-being, but rather to understand how quality of life is constructed, perceived, and governed in territorially fragile contexts, characterised by persistent structural constraints as well as latent resources.

The combined analysis of the three studies makes it possible to conceptualise quality of life as a relational and territorially situated process, emerging from the interaction between material conditions, immaterial dimensions, individual and collective agency, and local institutional configurations. The progression of the research design—from the exploratory perceptions of local administrators, to the quantitative modelling of residents’ capabilities, and finally to the reconstruction of mayors’ development visions—allowed different but interconnected levels of

analysis to be articulated, offering a complex and non-reductionist interpretation of well-being in inner areas. This approach moves beyond a purely universalist application of the Capabilities Approach, achieving what can be defined as a 'territorialization' of Nussbaum's theory. By doing so, the research demonstrates that capabilities are not a static list, but dimensions that acquire specific meanings and weights depending on the geographical and institutional context.

A first cross-cutting element that clearly emerges concerns the structural nature of territorial constraints. Across all studies, albeit through different analytical tools and languages, distance from essential services, demographic decline, the fragility of local administrative systems, and limited economic opportunities constitute the shared background against which lived experiences and institutional narratives are constructed. However, these factors do not operate as mechanical determinants of quality of life. Rather, they interact with relational, symbolic, and political dimensions, generating heterogeneous and often counterintuitive configurations of well-being.

Within this framework, the empirical results suggest a configuration of quality of life that departs from traditional material-centric interpretations. Specifically, the analysis shows that, in territorially fragile contexts characterised by persistent structural deficiencies, material resources and control over the economic environment do not represent the primary explanatory factors of perceived quality of life. Instead, dimensions of a relational, symbolic, and political nature—such as the ability to influence local decision-making processes, a sense of agency, the capacity to project one's life course, and the emotional components of well-being—assume a central role.

This configuration can be interpreted in light of what is defined in this research as a materiality paradox. This expression is not intended to introduce an autonomous theoretical concept, but rather to offer an interpretative synthesis of a set of well-established findings in the literature on well-being and the Capabilities Approach. In line with these contributions, the results indicate that where material conditions are structurally constrained and difficult to modify in the short term, their explanatory power tends to diminish, while well-being is primarily constructed through processes of adaptation, participation, and recognition.

In this sense, the paradox does not lie in the irrelevance of material conditions, but in the fact that, in contexts of territorial marginality, quality of life is defined above all by the possibility of exercising substantive freedoms and attributing meaning to one's lived experience, rather than by the absolute level of available resources. This interpretation is consistent with the Capabilities Approach, which distinguishes between means and real freedoms, as well as with the literature on well-being in rural and peripheral contexts, which highlights the coexistence of relatively high levels of subjective satisfaction and persistent structural constraints. The paradox thus highlights a process of adaptive resilience: in the absence of robust material support, the 'restanza' (the conscious choice to stay) and

the 'Control over the Political Environment' emerge as essential conversion factors. As evidenced by the regression results, these immaterial dimensions allow individuals to transform a condition of geographical isolation into a dignified life, making civic agency and social cohesion more decisive for perceived well-being than the mere possession of material assets.

This reading can be further enriched by drawing on Elinor Ostrom's work (Nobel Prize in economics) on the governance of common-pool resources (Ostrom, 1990). Ostrom's contribution highlights how collective well-being is not determined solely by the availability of material resources, but by the capacity of local communities to define shared rules, exercise collective agency, and participate in the management of common goods. From this perspective, essential services, territorial assets, social cohesion, and local institutional arrangements can be understood as collectively governed goods, whose value depends less on their quantitative provision than on the quality of the institutional and participatory processes that regulate their use. This framework offers a critical mechanism to interrupt the 'vicious circle of fragility': by fostering collective agency and co-production, it enables local communities to transform essential services and territorial assets from passive provisions into actively managed common goods. This shifts the dynamic from service withdrawal accelerating depopulation, towards community-led solutions that reinforce local viability and resilience.

Read through this lens, the centrality of political agency and participation emerging from the empirical results does not appear incidental. In territorially fragile contexts, where material constraints are structurally embedded, quality of life is closely linked to the extent to which individuals and communities are able to engage in collective action, co-produce solutions, and influence the institutional processes shaping everyday life. This interpretation resonates with Ostrom's critique of centralized and uniform governance models (Ostrom, 1990) and reinforces the relevance of place-based approaches that recognize the role of local institutions, shared norms, and participatory practices in sustaining collective well-being.

The integrated reading of the results also makes it possible to highlight convergences and fractures between residents' perspectives and those of institutional actors. While there is a shared awareness of the main territorial criticalities—particularly demographic decline and the contraction of essential services—significant differences emerge in how these issues are interpreted and prioritised. For residents, quality of life is strongly anchored in everyday experience, in the possibility of maintaining meaningful social relationships, and in a perceived sense of control over one's own existence. For local institutions, by contrast, it tends to be filtered through administrative constraints, funding opportunities, and strategic development narratives. As a result, quality of life emerges not only as a condition to be measured, but also as a field of symbolic and political negotiation, in which different

actors attribute different meanings to the same territorial factors. A key theoretical value of this multi-actor synthesis lies in revealing a 'perceptual misalignment': while administrators emphasize the burden of bureaucracy and the need for administrative simplification as primary obstacles, residents focus on the daily experience of isolation and the lack of essential transport. Mapping these divergences is essential for designing place-based policies that do not just provide services, but reconcile institutional narratives with the actual lived experiences of the community.

Taken together, the results confirm the role of territory as a capability conversion factor. Inner areas are not merely contexts deprived of resources, but environments that amplify certain life opportunities while constraining others. Basilicata, as a region entirely classified as an inner area, thus represents a privileged empirical laboratory for observing how capabilities are always situated, historically and territorially mediated, and how well-being depends on the possibility of transforming resources—both material and immaterial—into effectively exercisable opportunities.

Specifically, the study shows how abstract philosophical categories transform into concrete policy indicators: for instance, “Other Species” and “Bodily Integrity” in inner areas are no longer generic concepts, but translate into the urgent management of hydrogeological risks and the impact of wildlife on safety and agriculture. This shift from the universal to the situated allows for a more accurate identification of territorial 'unfreedoms' that need to be addressed by local governance.

## **2 Final conclusions**

In light of the cross-cutting synthesis of results, this dissertation offers several contributions to the scientific debate on quality of life and inner areas. At the theoretical level, the research strengthens a capabilities-based and place-based reading of well-being, empirically demonstrating how capabilities assume different weights and configurations in contexts of territorial marginality. Quality of life emerges as a multidimensional and relational phenomenon that cannot be adequately understood either through standardised economic indicators or through decontextualised subjective evaluations alone.

From a methodological perspective, the study demonstrates the value of an integrated research design capable of combining qualitative and quantitative tools and of placing individual perceptions in dialogue with institutional perspectives. In addition, the present research contributes to advancing the theoretical understanding of quality of life in inner areas by explicitly integrating the Capabilities Approach with this multi-method analytical design and a dialogical perspective between institutional actors and residents. While existing literature often treats these dimensions separately—either focusing on normative frameworks, measurement models, or stakeholder perceptions—this study

demonstrates how their combined application enables a more comprehensive and territorially grounded interpretation of well-being. In particular, the integration of capabilities-based theory with empirical evidence derived from both quantitative modelling and qualitative inquiry allows for capturing not only the resources and perceptions associated with quality of life, but also the underlying processes through which opportunities are shaped, constrained, and interpreted within specific territorial contexts. This contributes to bridging the gap between abstract theoretical approaches and context-sensitive analyses, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of quality of life as a relational and territorially embedded phenomenon in inner areas.

The adoption of a sequential approach made it possible to overcome the fragmentation that often characterises studies on well-being, offering a coherent and articulated interpretation of quality of life in inner areas. In this sense, methodology does not merely function as a technical support, but constitutes an integral part of the conceptual construction of the object of study.

The policy implications emerging from this work point to the need to move beyond uniform and sectoral approaches, favouring place-based strategies oriented not only toward the restoration of services, but also toward the strengthening of participation, agency, and recognition within local communities. Quality of life in inner areas appears to be closely linked to the possibility of exercising substantive citizenship, understood as effective access to rights, opportunities, and decision-making processes. In this light, translating Ostrom's principles of common-pool resource governance into concrete local policies becomes crucial. This entails promoting instruments such as community cooperatives for managing local services (e.g., healthcare outposts), fostering associative management of municipal functions, and supporting place-based investments that strengthen local institutional capital. By enabling mayors to flexibly manage resources and transform territorial constraints into assets (e.g., through sustainable tourism or 'wellness city' initiatives, as emerged from the empirical studies), these policies can foster a more endogenous and resilient development path."

As with any research, this study also presents certain limitations. The analysis is strongly contextualised in the case of Basilicata and does not allow for automatic generalisations to other territorial contexts. Moreover, some sampling choices and the predominantly cross-sectional nature of the data suggest caution in the interpretation of the findings. At the same time, these limitations open up avenues for future research, including comparative analyses across regions, longitudinal approaches, and the inclusion of additional social actors.

Ultimately, this dissertation does not aim to provide a definitive definition of quality of life in inner areas, but rather to redefine its analytical coordinates, showing how well-being is inseparable from territorial conditions, individual and collective capacities for action, and the forms of governance that

enable their exercise. From this perspective, quality of life in inner areas emerges not as a given outcome, but as an open, dynamic, and deeply place-rooted process.

In conclusion, by integrating the Capabilities Approach with a multi-method design, this dissertation contributes to the literature by proving that quality of life in fragile territories is not merely a 'deficit' to be filled, but a political and relational field where the agency of both institutions and citizens remains the most powerful factor for territorial resilience.

### **3 Reference**

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## **APPENDIX**

### *Appendix A*

1. I would like to begin by asking for a brief, general description of the territory you administer. Could you please specify its name, geographical location, and province? I am also interested in knowing if it is part of a national park or nature reserve and, if so, what specific constraints or regulations apply. Finally, could you provide the approximate population?

2. Regarding local services, I would like to inquire about their importance, presence, and the community's level of satisfaction with them. Specifically, I am interested in:

- i. Education
- ii. Healthcare services, including hospitals, local health authorities (such as Azienda Sanitaria Locale – ASL), community health centres, social assistance services, and pharmacies.
- iii. Which is the nearest urban centre that offers a comprehensive range of services? I would also like to know the typical distance and travel time to reach it.
- iv. Transportation infrastructure, such as train and bus services, and the condition of the road network.
- v. The role of tourism. Is it a significant sector in the area? If so, what is the availability of accommodation and dining facilities?
- vi. The presence of commercial services and amenities, such as supermarkets, postal services, banks, tobacconists, and clothing retail.
- vii. Recreational, sporting, and cultural facilities, including cinemas and community centres.

3. Could you describe the social fabric of the community? Furthermore, I would like to know if there are significant or established immigrant communities residing in the area.

4. Regarding safety and security, what is the general perception within the community? Are there any specific safety concerns I should be aware of?

5. I would like to inquire about the quality of the local environment and the state of the landscape.

6. From your perspective, what would you identify as the main challenges, resources, and strengths of this territory?

7. Do you observe specific challenges or difficulties faced by particular socioeconomic groups, such as young people, women, or immigrants? If such challenges exist, I would like to know if any specific policies or interventions have been implemented to support these groups and, if so, what they entail.

8. In relation to the municipal administration, I would like to ask if you consider the available human resources to be sufficient. Furthermore, are they adequately trained to meet the current and future needs of the municipality?

9. Focusing on the agricultural sector, I would like to understand the main difficulties faced by local farming operations. On a related note, I am interested to know if there is a presence of young farmers or entrepreneurs who have chosen to remain in and invest in the local agricultural economy.

10. I would like to inquire about demographic trends. Have you observed a tendency towards depopulation in your municipality? If so, I am interested in learning about any strategies or specific projects, such as the 'One-Euro-House' initiative, that have been implemented to counteract this trend.

11. Regarding sustainable development, I would like to know if the municipality has received public funding for related initiatives. If so, do you consider this funding to be sufficient to achieve your objectives?

12. In your opinion, what actions or policies could be suggested to further improve the quality of life in this area?

13. Finally, I would like to explore the perspective of young people. What do you believe are the primary reasons that motivate young people to remain in the municipality? Furthermore, what arguments would you use to persuade young individuals or families to move here?

## Appendix B

### 1. Questionnaire

The University of Basilicata is conducting a research study on the Quality of Life in the internal areas of the region. This questionnaire is intended to assess individuals' personal perceptions of their quality of life in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, concerns, and the context in which they live. To carry out this assessment, we kindly ask you to answer a series of questions covering different aspects of quality of life, as well as to share your opinions on a range of related topics.

The questionnaire is completely anonymous, and all data collected will be used exclusively for scientific and research purposes. Responses will be analyzed in an aggregated form, in full compliance with privacy and data protection regulations.

(This questionnaire was originally developed in Italian for Italian target and translated into English for research purposes.)

#### Section 1: LIFE

1. In the place where you live, do you think there are sufficient conditions that allow you to live a satisfactory life?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

2. Do you consider your income sufficient to ensure you a satisfactory standard of living?

1 Not at all	2 A little	3 Neither little nor much	4 Quiet a lot	5 Very much

3. Do you think that what your place of residence offers (in terms of services) is sufficient to ensure you a satisfactory standard of living?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

#### Section 2: BODILY HEALTH

4. Does your health (physical and/or psychological) in any way limit your daily activities compared to most people your age?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

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How much has this affected your confidence about the future?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

5. Based on your living conditions and the place where you live, would you be able to cope with unexpected health-related events?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

6. Are there facilities in the place where you live that meet your health needs (physical and/or psychological)?

Yes  No  I don't know

If yes, do they provide adequate services?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

7. According to the Italian Ministry of Health, “a varied diet is based on the consumption of a wide variety of seasonal vegetables and fruits, cereals and legumes, fish, eggs, meat, and extra virgin olive oil (EVO)”.

How close is your daily diet to this definition?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

8. Is your current home suitable for your and/or your family's needs?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

If your answer to question 8 is between 1 (Not at all) and 4 (Quite a lot), please indicate one or more of the following reasons related to existing problems:

Accessibility  Drinking water  Electricity  Gas  Health services  Laundry services  Food storage  Waste collection  Sewerage  Emergency services  Adequate living space  Structural problems  Health issues (mold and/or humidity)

**Section 3 – BODILY INTEGRITY**

**9.** In the place where you live, are you able to move freely from one place to another?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**10.** In the place where you live, do you feel safe (for example, from assaults, thefts, landslides, floods, etc.)?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

If your answer to question 10 is between 1 (Not at all) and 4 (Quite a lot), please indicate one or more of the following problems:

- Assaults    Wild animals    Thefts    Landslides    Floods    Earthquakes    Environmental pollution

Considering the reasons you selected, do you think that safety control by public institutions is adequate?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**11.** In the place where you live, do you feel safe/free to live your sexual orientation, whatever it may be?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**12.** In the place where you live, have you ever experienced assaults and/or bullying because of your sexual orientation, whatever it may be?

<b>1 Never</b>	<b>2 Rarely</b>	<b>3 Sometimes</b>	<b>4 Often</b>	<b>5 Always</b>

**Section 4: SENSES, IMAGINATION, THOUGHT**

**13.** Do you think that the place where you live provides adequate educational and/or training facilities and services?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

14. Do you think that the initiatives promoted by institutions to ensure a minimum level of education are adequate?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

15. At present, how easy is it to access an adequate level of education and/or training in the place where you live?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

16. In the place where you live, can you take part in educational, cultural, religious, or similar events?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

Do you feel involved in these initiatives?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

Do you think these initiatives are adequate?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

17. In the place where you live, do you feel free to express your beliefs and ideals?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

18. Are you religious?

Yes  No

If yes, in the place where you live, do you feel free to practice your religion?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**Section 5: EMOTIONS**

**19.** In general, do you feel free to express your feelings without external influence or pressure?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**20.** In the place where you live, is it easy to build lasting friendships with people outside your workplace or school?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**21.** Based on your current living conditions, how easy is it to enjoy the affection and support of your family and/or close friends?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**22.** How attached do you feel to the place where you live?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**23.** Would you like to leave the place where you live?

Yes  No  I don't know

**Section 6: PRACTICAL REASON**

**24.** Is your idea of Quality of Life based on your personal judgment, without prejudice or external influence?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

25. Outside of your job (or past job)/school, do you feel you have played an active role in your personal life — meaning the ability to make and carry out your own choices?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

26. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: “I have (or had) a clear plan for how I would like my life to be.”

<b>1 Strongly disagree</b>	<b>2 Disagree</b>	<b>3 Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>4 Agree</b>	<b>5 Strongly agree</b>

27. How often do you reflect on how you are living your life and where you are going — or how often have you reflected on how you have lived your life and where it has taken you?

<b>1 Never</b>	<b>2 Rarely</b>	<b>3 Sometimes</b>	<b>4 Often</b>	<b>5 Always</b>

### Section 7: AFFILIATION

28. How much do you agree with the following statement: “I respect, appreciate, and value other people.”

<b>1 Strongly disagree</b>	<b>2 Disagree</b>	<b>3 Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>4 Agree</b>	<b>5 Strongly agree</b>

29. Do you find it easy to imagine other people’s situations — that is, to “put yourself in their shoes”?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

30. Are you able to meet with friends or family for a coffee or a lunch/dinner at least once a month (that is, to engage in various forms of social interaction)?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

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**31. Do you feel free to maintain and pass on your traditions?**

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**32. Are there associations or community groups in the place where you live?**

Yes  No  I don't know

If yes, are you interested in their activities?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

If yes and you are interested, do you have the opportunity to take an active part in their activities?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

Do you feel involved in the activities carried out by these associations?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**33. Recently, have you thought of yourself as a person without value?**

<b>1 Never</b>	<b>2 Rarely</b>	<b>3 Sometimes</b>	<b>4 Often</b>	<b>5 Always</b>

**34. Outside of any job or work/school situation, have you ever experienced discrimination because of your ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, or age?**

<b>1 Never</b>	<b>2 Rarely</b>	<b>3 Sometimes</b>	<b>4 Often</b>	<b>5 Always</b>

**35. Outside of any job or work/school situation, how likely do you think it is that in the future you will face discrimination because of your ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, or age?**

<b>1 Very unlikely</b>	<b>2 Unlikely</b>	<b>3 Neither likely nor unlikely</b>	<b>4 Likely</b>	<b>5 Very likely</b>

**Section 8: OTHER SPECIES**

36. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: “In my area, there is a respectful and harmonious relationship between people, nature, and local wildlife.”

<b>1 Strongly disagree</b>	<b>2 Disagree</b>	<b>3 Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>4 Agree</b>	<b>5 Strongly agree</b>

37. In the place where you live, do you have the opportunity to fully experience and enjoy natural spaces?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

38. How would you rate the quality of natural spaces (in terms of maintenance, safety, accessibility, available services, etc.)?

<b>1 Very poor</b>	<b>2 Poor</b>	<b>3 Adequate</b>	<b>4 Good</b>	<b>5 Excellent</b>

39. In the place where you live, are there activities to protect and enhance the environment (for example, park and forest clean-up days, car-free Sundays, etc.)?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

Do you think these actions are sufficient?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

40. Do you think that in the place where you live the environment and surrounding nature are respected?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**Section 9: PLAY**

**41.** In the place where you live, do you have the opportunity to pursue your interests or hobbies — that is, to take part in recreational activities?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

Are the available facilities for your interests or hobbies sufficient (For example: “I want to play football — there is at least one football field”)?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

If they are sufficient, are they adequate?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**42.** In the place where you live, are social or community events organized (for example, local festivals, neighborhood or town celebrations)?

<b>1 Never</b>	<b>2 Rarely</b>	<b>3 Sometimes</b>	<b>4 Often</b>	<b>5 Always</b>

Do you consider these events appropriate?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

How involved do you feel in these events?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

Do you think these events are attractive to people of all age groups?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

### **Section 10a: CONTROL OVER ONE’S POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

**43.** How much do you agree with the following statement: “In the place where I live, I can take part in political activities that affect my life, if I wish.”

<b>1 Strongly disagree</b>	<b>2 Disagree</b>	<b>3 Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>4 Agree</b>	<b>5 Strongly agree</b>

44. In the place where you live, do you feel that institutions listen to you?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

45. What are the main issues reported to political institutions, if any? Please indicate one or more of the following:

- Roads     Public transport     Infrastructure     Health services     School services  
 Accommodation services     Social services     Recreational services     Community spaces  
 Natural areas     Accessibility     Essential services (e.g., electricity, internet, water, pharmacy, postal service, etc.)

Based on the issues reported, do you think that political institutions have taken action on them?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**Section 10b: CONTROL OVER ONE’S MATERIAL ENVIRONMENT**

46. Do you own any property?

- Yes     No

If yes, do your living conditions allow you to enjoy your property rights in a satisfactory way?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

Please indicate one or more reasons:

- High maintenance costs     Expropriation     Easements     Road network     Weather events  
 Service supply

47. Are you currently employed?

- Yes     No     Retired

(If your answer is *No*, go directly to question 50. If *Yes* or *Retired*, continue below.)

At work, are you treated with respect and free to express your opinions? If retired: When you were working, were you treated with respect and free to express your opinions?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

If you work, do you find it easy to get along with your colleagues? If retired: When you were working, was it easy to get along with your colleagues?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

If you work, to what extent does your job make use of your skills and talents? If retired: To what extent did your job make use of your skills and talents?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

If you work, have you ever experienced discrimination during your job search because of your ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, or age? If retired: During your past job search, did you ever experience discrimination because of your ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, or age?

<b>1 Never</b>	<b>2 Rarely</b>	<b>3 Sometimes</b>	<b>4 Often</b>	<b>5 Always</b>

**48.** Do you work in the same place where you live? If retired: Did you work in the same place where you live?

Yes  No

(If *No*, go directly to question 49.)

If yes, does the place where you live allow you (or did it allow you) to work in a peaceful and comfortable way?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**49.** (Only for those who answered "No" to question 48)

If you work or worked in a place different from where you live, do you have to travel long distances (in terms of time or kilometers)?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

Is (or was) the travel easy?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

**50.** *(Only for those who answered “No” to question 47)*

If you are not working, do you plan to look for a job in the future?

Yes  No  I don't know

If yes, when you look for a job in the future, how likely do you think it is that you will face discrimination because of your ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, or age?

<b>1 Very unlikely</b>	<b>2 Unlikely</b>	<b>3 Neither likely nor unlikely</b>	<b>4 Likely</b>	<b>5 Very likely</b>

If yes, do you think the place where you live gives you the same job opportunities as other places?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

### Extra

Quality of life is a concept that includes economic, social, environmental, cultural, and political aspects.

It is an individual's perception of their position in life within the cultural context and value system in which they live, and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns. It represents a state of complete well-being (physical, mental, and social) and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHOQOL, 1995).

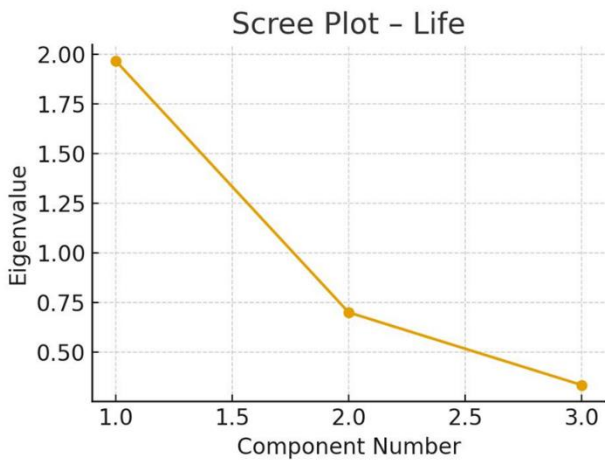
How close are your living conditions in the place where you live to this definition?

<b>1 Not at all</b>	<b>2 A little</b>	<b>3 Neither little nor much</b>	<b>4 Quiet a lot</b>	<b>5 Very much</b>

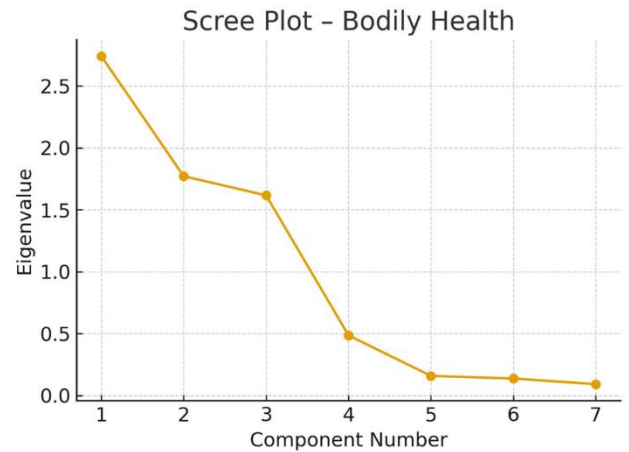
## 2. Scree plot

This section presents the scree plots obtained from the Principal Component Analyses (PCA) conducted for each of Nussbaum's ten central capabilities. The plots display the eigenvalues associated with the extracted components and indicate, through the point of inflection ("elbow"), the number of components retained for each capability dimension.

Figure



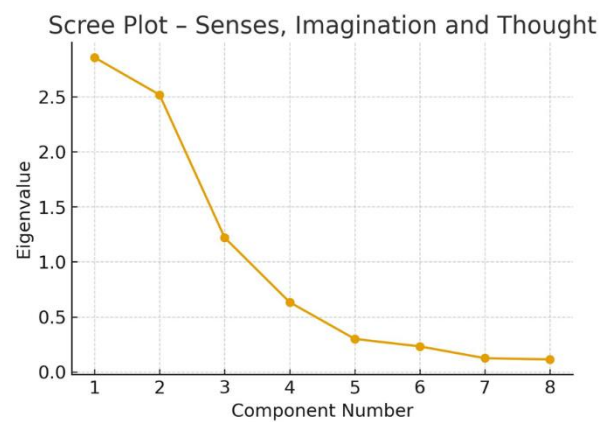
Figure



Figure



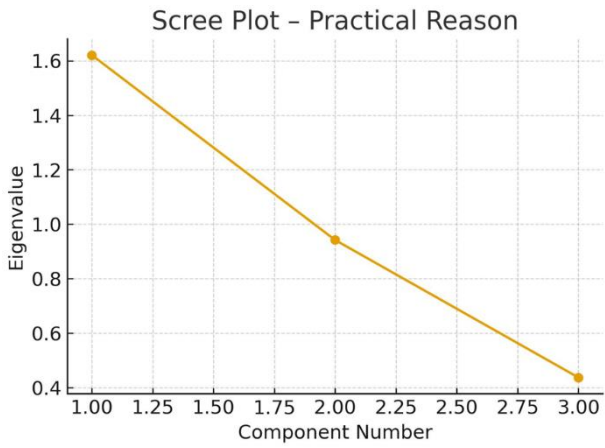
Figure



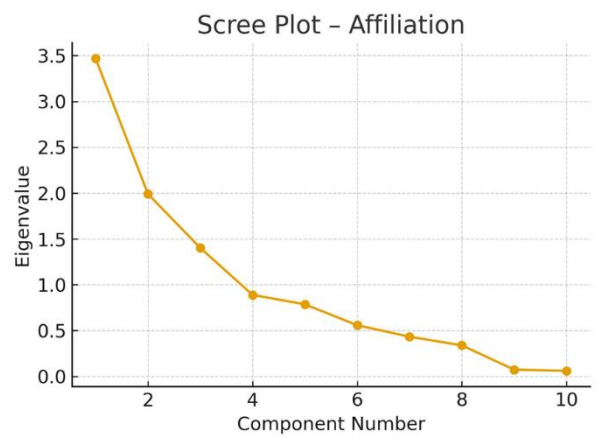
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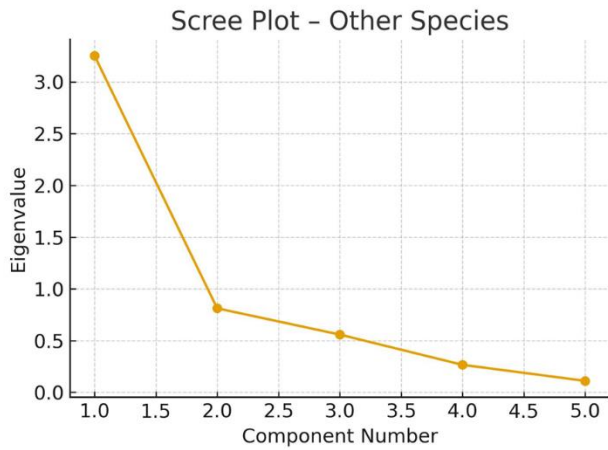
Figure



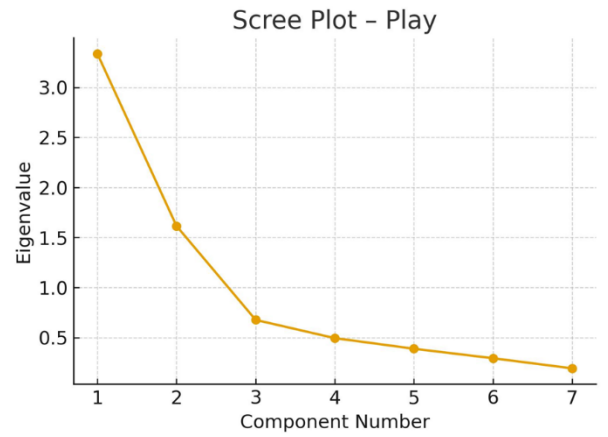
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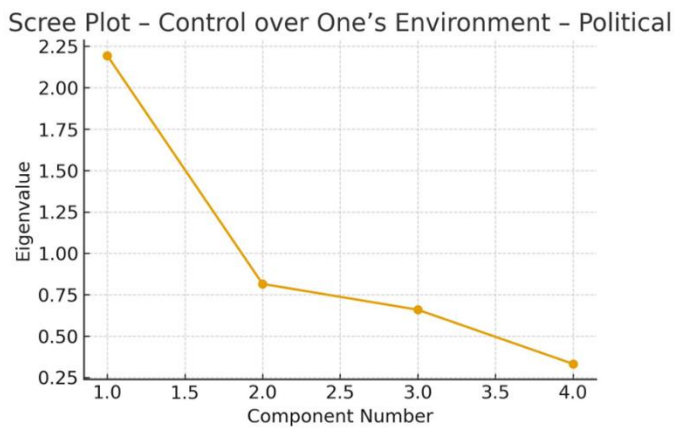
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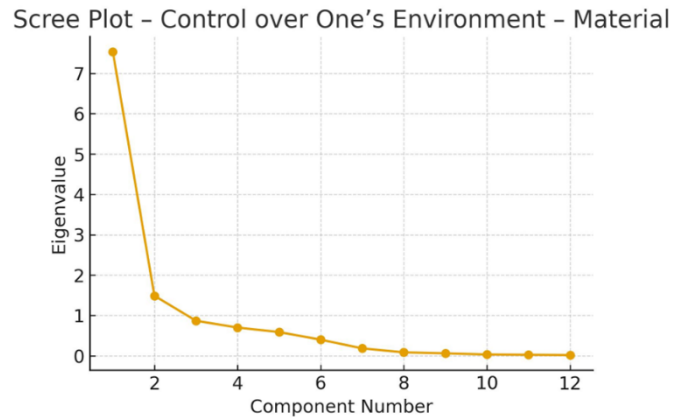
Figure



Figure



Figure



*Appendix C*

*1. Q sort composition*

The table below presents the 24 statements that comprise the final Q-set:

<b>No.</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Source</b>
1	The local health services are of good quality	Nussbaum (2011)– Life & Bodily Health
2	Essential services such as water, electricity, public transport, internet, schools, pharmacies, and shops selling basic necessities are essential to avoid the abandonment of municipalities	Nussbaum (2011) – (Life & Bodily Health)
3	Crime rates are low	Nussbaum (2011) – Bodily Integrity
4	The risk of natural disasters (hydrogeological instability) is low	Nussbaum (2011) – Bodily Integrity
5	The risk of attacks by wild animals is low	Nussbaum (2011) – Bodily Integrity
6	The quality of local roads and isolation pose a risk to the most vulnerable citizens, such as the elderly and disabled	Nussbaum (2011) – Bodily Integrity
7	Local schools offer good quality education at all levels	Nussbaum (2011) – Senses, Immagination and Thought
8	There are sufficient cultural and recreational opportunities for local citizens	Nussbaum (2011) – Senses, Immagination and Thought
9	Local citizens feel happy and satisfied with their lives within the municipality I administer	Nussbaum (2011) – Emotions
10	The depopulation of inner areas has a negative impact on the emotional well-being of the citizens who remain	Nussbaum (2011) – Emotions
11	It is important to consider the long-term impact of policy decisions on inner areas	Nussbaum (2011) – Pratical Reason
12	Regional/national decisions take into account the needs of inner areas	Nussbaum (2011) – Pratical Reason

No.	Statement	Source
13	Inner areas communities are inclusive and respectful of diversity (ethnicity, religion, orientation, etc.)	Nussbaum (2011) – Affiliation
14	Citizens actively participate in the social and political life of the municipality	Nussbaum (2011) – Affiliation
15	Cooperation between municipalities is essential to maintain essential services such as water, electricity, public transport, internet, schools, pharmacies and shops selling basic necessities in inner areas	Nussbaum (2011) – Affiliation
16	In the territory I administer, there is a harmonious coexistence between man and nature	Nussbaum (2011) – Other Species
17	Local policies promote environmental protection and biodiversity conservation	Nussbaum (2011) – Other Species
18	There are sufficient recreational opportunities for ALL age groups of the resident population	Nussbaum (2011) – Play
19	Citizens can influence political decisions concerning their municipality	Nussbaum (2011) – Control Over One’s Environment – Political
20	There are sufficient economic/employment opportunities for young people	Nussbaum (2011) – Control Over One’s Environment – Material
21	Traditional agriculture and livestock farming must be preserved as cultural and economic heritage	Piras & Pedes (2025)
22	Tourism is important for socio-economic development	Shakya & Vagnarelli (2024)
23	The local community values their traditions and cultural heritage	Whitaker (2024)
24	There should be fewer bureaucratic restrictions and constraints on the use of funds for local development	Cicco et al. (2025); Moliterni et al. (2025)

## 2. Sample

The table below shows anonymous mayor codes and associated factor loadings used to interpret shared viewpoints in the Q Methodology analysis.

<b>ID</b>	<b>Factor</b>	<b>Loading</b>
M_01	-	-
M_02	5	0,5626
M_03	5	0,7284
M_04	2	0,6685
M_05	4	0,5853
M_06	-	-
M_07	4	0,4801
M_08	1	0,7276
M_09	5	0,4687
M_10	-	-
M_11	1	0,6655
M_12	3	0,639
M_13	3	0,4693
M_14	-	-
M_15	-	-
M_16	-	-
M_17	2	0,5351
M_18	5	0,7169
M_19	-	-
M_20	-	-
M_21	1	0,5248
M_22	-	-
M_23	4	0,5696
M_24	5	0,5993
M_25	3	0,7951
M_26	3	0,607
M_27	5	0,6213
M_28	4	0,4253
M_29	3	0,4061

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<b>M_30</b>	5	0,7202
<b>M_31</b>	4	0,6642

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