SPATIAL JUSTICE IN FRAGILE PERIPHERAL AREAS

Analysing Italian strategies and approaches to counter territorial inequalities and spatial injustice

Rodrigo Vielmo Moura
Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy
rodrigo.vielmo@polimi.it

ABSTRACT

Spatial (in)justice is a multidisciplinary topic commonly associated with environmental and territorial justice. Considering the existence of Italy's territorial inequalities, the advent of the National Strategy for Inner Areas and the chances to reverse existing imbalances due to EU instruments, tools, and funds, this paper aims to explore the inner areas' notions, goals, and interventions to establish links with spatial (in)justice topic and discuss the project's coherence and alignment with the local needs and territorial capital (possibilities). The inner area's inhabitants are deprived of citizenship rights and suffer from the absence and distance of suitable essential services. These factors unquestionably reduce the residents' opportunities and choices and corroborate the existence of spatial injustice and socioeconomic disparities. The methodology is based on a literature review on spatial justice, peripheral and inner areas topics, and a document analysis examining the national policy and Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario strategy.

Keywords: spatial justice, territorial disparities, inner areas, cohesion policy
Topic: territorial analysis and project

Introduction

Spatial justice is often associated with environmental, social and territorial justice (Soja, 2009; Fainstein, 2014) and the 'right to the city' (Harvey, 2008). Shucksmith et al. (2021:323) argue that "*social justice* concerns the worth and rights, opportunities and wellbeing of all citizens, addressing issues of fairness and inclusion, poverty and inequality, power and responsibility". In other words, it is the quest to reduce urban and rural inequalities regardless of the location and geomorphologic conditions. The political sphere also brings theoretical contribution, reinforced by concepts such as 'geography of discontent' (McCann, 2020) and 'left-behind places' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

From a European perspective, the EU Regional Policy demonstrates the commitment and the pursuit of spatial justice and territorial cohesion in member state regions over decades (Madanipour et al., 2022). It aims to strengthen socioeconomic sectors, enhance job opportunities, and construct a more just and sustainable environment (European Commission, 2022). Social and economic studies note that the concept of 'left behind' places' has generated various labels that apply to different plans, strategies and approaches worldwide (MacKinnon et al., 2024).

Henceforth, influenced by place-based approach and territorial and socioeconomic cohesion, the Italian government launched the 'National Strategy for Inner Areas' (SNAI) as a means to counter demographic trends, socioeconomic discrepancies, provide better essential services, do a better use of the territorial capital, and enhance people's quality of life (Barca et al., 2014). In Italy, these types of geography are admitted as 'inner areas', defined as "areas at some considerable distance from hubs providing essential services (education, health, and mobility), with a wealth of key environmental and cultural resources of many different kinds, which have been subject to anthropisation for centuries" (Barca et al., 2014:7).

Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario, Italy, is one more example where the inhabitants, despite other issues, are to some extent deprived of citizenship rights and suffer from the lack and distance of basic public services, especially those located in the mountains and valley bottoms. These factors impact residents' opportunities and choices and corroborate the existence of spatial injustice and cultural and socioeconomic disparities. On the other hand, the inner area includes remarkable natural resources that can be conceived for innovative projects.

Considering Italy's territorial inequalities, the advent of the SNAI, and the chances to reverse existing injustices due to EU instruments, tools, and funds, specific questions emerge: What are the possible links between spatial justice and the SNAI and Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario Strategy? How has this subject been approached and inserted within these documents? Are the local development projects coherent and aligned with the local needs and territorial conditions to promote spatial justice and reduce local disparities?

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the inner areas' notions, goals, and interventions to establish links with spatial (in)justice and discuss the project's coherence and alignment with the local needs and territorial capital (possibilities). The research method is based first on a literature review on spatial justice, peripheral and inner areas themes, and second on a qualitative document analysis (Glenn, 2009), which examines two official documents: the 'Italian Strategy for Inner Areas' (Barca et al., 2014) and 'Strategia d'Area Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario', the local strategy (Comune di Taceno, 2018).

The first section points out the factors and reasons influencing local and regional disparities and reinforcing spatial injustice in Italy. The second introduces the case study and the third depicts the national and local strategies checking the approaches and projects to tackle local issues and existing imbalances. The fourth section discusses and concludes the paper based on links between projects and spatial (in)justice dimension.

1. Identifying spatial injustice in the context of Italian inner areas

Over the years, the favouring of large urban cities (centres) has contributed to regional disparities and depopulation to the extent that spatial injustices are increasingly apparent and common in peripheral and rural areas. The Spanish Recovery Plan, '130 medidas frente al reto demográfico', claims that the fight against depopulation and other demographic issues is also a matter of combating inequality and injustice, as the lack of territorial cohesion negatively affects and weakens the foundation of a more dynamic, sustainable and resilient country (MITECO, 2021).

Nevertheless, at least for the EU member states, the Cohesion Policy is an attractive policy mechanism to counter spatial injustices in fragile peripheral territories and strengthen territorial and socioeconomic cohesion. It covers many tools and instruments that can be combined with varied funds. Clearly, spatial injustice can also be found in large urban environments but this paper draws attention in these events occurring in fragile geographies as the inner areas.

Italy's geomorphological characteristics (hilly and mountainous territory) establish conditions that can be realised as opportunities or barriers. After the Second World War, industrialisation and economic growth were priorities in Italy, and they assumed two dimensions: widespread and polarised (Barca et al., 2014). Even suggesting antagonism, in this case, both terms have contributed negatively to the lens of inner areas. The widespread condition reached many villages, municipalities and cities over the national borders. Contrarily, the industrialisation and economic options have been polarised because they were restricted and sometimes exclusively to specific urban centres and systems, causing regional disparities interconnected to demographic trends and the drop in the use of territorial capital in villages and towns (Barca et al., 2014).

Despite the polycentric network connecting small, medium, and large cities, the Italian territory is set in small centres incapable of allowing suitable access to basic services to their residents (Barca et al., 2014) and the causes of the problem do not substantially vary from other fragile European areas; it includes accessibility issues, altimetric difference, demographic trends (depopulation, ageing, and low birth rate), reduction in employment, lack of innovation and technology, and underutilisation of its territorial capital. According to Barca et al. (2014), the territory is composed of almost 60% of inner areas.

2. Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario

Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario comprises 41 municipalities and is home to approximately fifty thousand inhabitants (Comitato Nazionale Aree Interne, 2022). This territorial arrangement embraces the province of Como and Lecco within Lombardy region, Italy. Lake Como and the mountains are the main natural resources and form a mountain lake area (altimetric difference). It is possible to achieve an altitude of 1,500 metres in a few kilometres. The population density is low, averaging 87.28 inhabitants per km². This is more noticeable in the mountains, where the density is 300 inhabitants per km² (Comune di Taceno, 2018).

The most common problems are associated with demographic issues reinforced by the lack or distance of essential services. There is also fragmented governance, a shortage of solutions for the altimetric difference, a scarcity of innovation, and weak tourism offers. Moreover, the proximity to Switzerland and municipalities with more infrastructure and quality services exacerbate imbalances. It threatens the level of education and the provision of health services. Classes are constantly interrupted, and healthcare services are reduced due to insufficient staff. The attractiveness found in municipalities bordering the lake and outside (especially among young people) explains such occurrences (Comune di Taceno, 2018).

The following figure highlights the inner area boundaries and the 'considered' centres providing essential services within and outside the inner area. They are more concentrated in municipalities bordering Lake Como, which partly justifies spatial and socioeconomic injustices in terms of infrastructure and systems impacting municipalities located in the mountains, hills, and valleys.
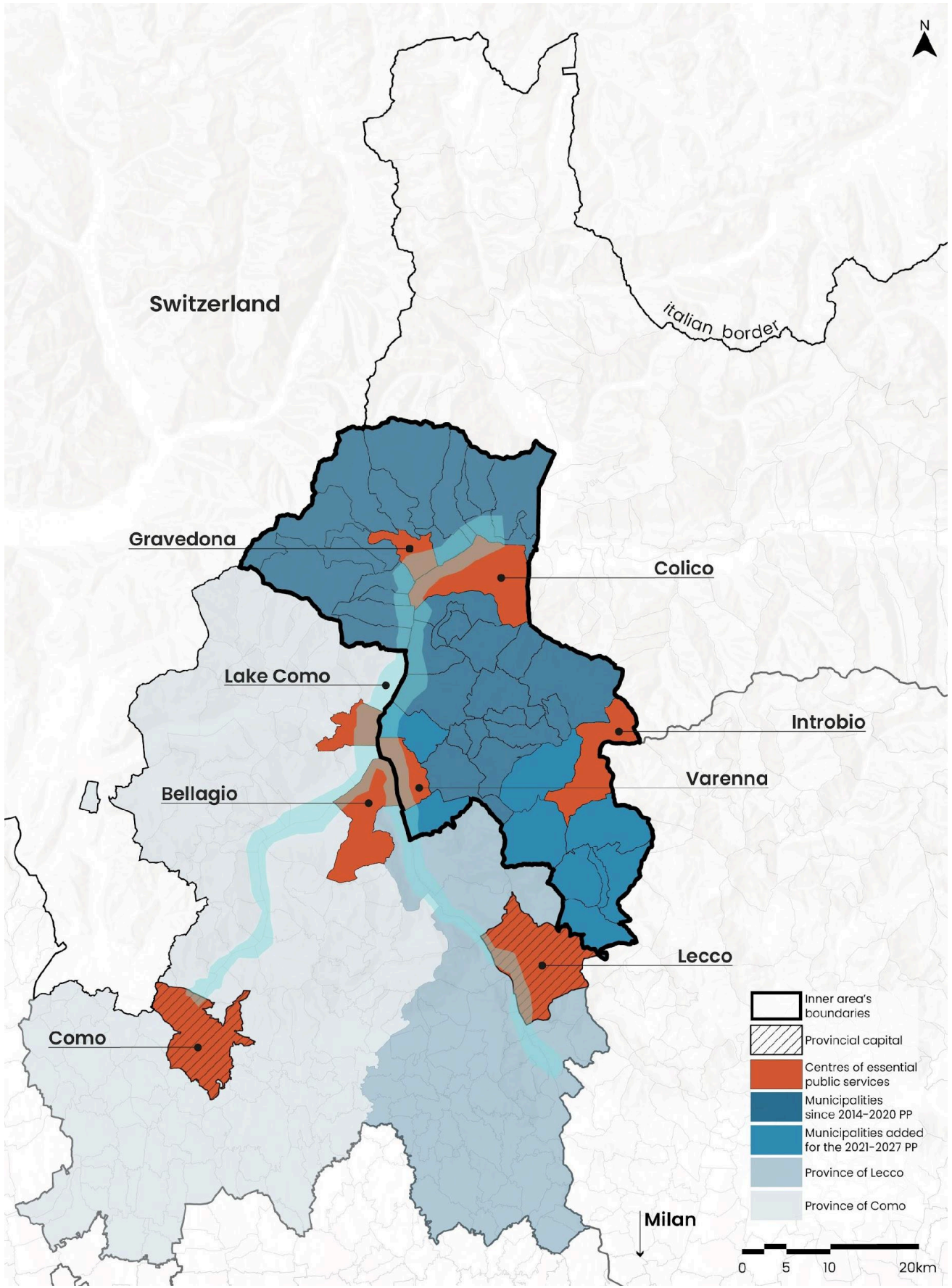
Fig. 01 Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario boundaries. Source: Author's own elaboration.

3. The strategies and projects to counter spatial injustice at the local level

In line with Glenn (2009), qualitative content analysis is conducted in this section in order to explore the national and local strategies (case study), checking approaches and projects to tackle the inner area's issues to later establish links with social and spatial injustice.

The central level states that inner areas are a national issue and that the mere fact that people live there leads to social and political implications. "[I]t is the people's quality of life that sits at the heart of the national strategic plan" (Barca et al., 2014:7), taking the inhabitant's well-being, social inclusion, balanced use of the territorial capital and job opportunity improvement as priorities.

The SNAI aims to constrain demographic trends, structuring solutions to attract residents, inhibit depopulation, and raise birth rates. Another priority guiding the policy is ensuring a suitable provision of essential public services in those geographies. The policy-makers recognise healthcare, mobility, and education as imperative services that all residents must access without any barrier or difficulty, affirming that when a determined number of people face problems accessing and making use of hospitals, public transport systems (mobility), and similar levels of education and quality of teaching to those usually encountered in larger urban centres, the constitution and citizenship rights are threatened (Barca et al., 2014).

3.1. The Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas

The SNAI grounds on the following points to reorganise the public health services in inner areas: a national and regional 'monitoring' capable of assessing particular groups of the population and their distance from health services. It incorporates attention to disabled and elderly people, services linked to pre-natal screening and accuracy in response to emergencies, and diagnostic and routine test services. Moreover, weekly nurse visits will ensure routine enquiries and check the necessity of a procedure/surgery; establishment of innovative and specific policy solutions (new pharmacies, physicians, inventive facilities in small municipalities such as care homes and other adapted vehicles), telemedicine service, and personalisation and revision of healthcare plans and legislation based on the local needs. Additionally, to guarantee rapid and responsive care to patients living in peripheral locations, the SNAI encourages the preparation of community members to use defibrillators in the case of heart attack emergencies while waiting for a helicopter or ambulance's aid.

Education interventions naturally include schools and other public facilities appraised as social, civic and cultural cores for human capital development. The educational strategies are under the following notions: prepare and equip young people through a decent level of education which guarantees relative freedom in the sense of being able to decide to stay or to go; provide training focused on the specific skills and abilities usually needed to work in the inner areas context; increase the role of schools and other facilities as civic centres – consolidating relationships between the territory and individuals, and communities and places of belonging. The schools will be open to children, adults, young and elderly people as a way of delivering new and complementary services and training to create circles of exchanging competencies that "valorise the knowledge and specific nature of typical local traditions" (Barca et al., 2014:36).

The improvement in mobility will assist in cutting the time taken and accessibility to access hubs of essential services and the main regional and local public transport routes. It recommends a 'cost-benefit analysis'. Furthermore, the strategies seek to amplify integrated pricing, info mobility systems, and tourist and landscape itineraries. Other criteria are grounded on the proper 'coordination of territorial programming and transport planning', 'transport demand analysis', and 'modal shift towards collective transport'. The actions have to do with delivering better programmatic content and synchronicity, which make actions financially viable.

3.2. Local development projects and intervention topics

The local strategy, or 'Strategia d'Area Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario', besides local development projects, includes goals, intervention topics, future scenarios and expected outcomes.

The first intervention topic aims to 'rationalising functions in associated form, increasing the level of associationism between local authorities'. Here, the decision-makers assume that reorganising inter-municipal services will overcome the existing fragmentation of local governance. Administrative capacity-building actions are at the forefront of this topic. They will equip public personnel to offer more suitable services and regular dialogue with civil society through meetings, campaigns, training and community empowerment.

The second topic is 'strengthening the educational offer to favour the territorial anchoring of settled populations (and new populations)'. This topic is aligned with the topic 'consolidate the competitiveness of the area's productive excellence, through an increase in the capacity to network company/company, company/training institutes, company/research institutes, with the aim of improving the employability of young people in the area'. In brief, the local interventions under the previous headings aim to offer extracurricular activities that impact the students, their parents, and the local community. The actions are directly related to cultural, artistic, sporting and recreational activities, territory knowledge (nature, history, itineraries and religion), and the enhancement of elemental disciplines (maths, languages and digital and technological areas). Furthermore, vocational entrepreneurial training with direct contact with new technologies and mainly local and foreign entrepreneurs. The projects will help parents better manage the time it takes to pick up their children (when necessary) and have more significant contact with the educational facilities in the inner area.

The fourth topic aims to 'increase the level of accessibility of the area, in relation to the specific geographies defined by the local public transport system and territorial nodes'. The area has unbalanced levels of accessibility along the east and west shores of the lake, as well as problems with moving up to the mountains. Thus, the interventions seek to enhance the network and connection between local public transport on primary and secondary routes in the area. The lake navigation projects will expand the number of journeys from both shores, but mainly from Como, and the lake crossing service will be improved through intermobility systems and the connection with the railway sector, which has better quality on the east shore (Lecco).

The fifth topic is 'increasing services aimed at taking care of people in a chronic and frail condition by the social and health care system, improving conditions for social inclusion'. The interventions are in line with the implementation of a Social and Health Centre in Introbio (mountain and valley bottom territory) and another in Bellano (bordering the lake). On the Como shore, an integrated network of telehealth services will be conceived with a reference point in Gravedona ed Uniti. Furthermore, there are projects for digital platforms that can share information, maximise scheduling and teleconsultations, and bring social operators closer to citizens. These latter actions seek to respond mainly to mountain communities where accessibility is unsuitable, and age and physical condition make the journey challenging.

The sixth topic aims to 'increase the level of integration of the tourist offer, for an integrated and distinctive communication of the area, and a systemic organisation of reception services and accommodation proposals'. The projects will boost tourist activities and the socioeconomic and cultural sectors by integrating the lake and the mountains (less visited territory) through diversifying and extending the options for residing and visiting the area and increasing the presence and activities in the mountain range so that people can make use of the various itineraries and historical routes for different types of activity. The landscape beauty and the singular natural ecosystem reinforce the process.

4. Discussion and final considerations

The findings denoted that both strategies focused on projects to enhance essential services. Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario decisions demonstrate a strong link with healthcare, education, and mobility (accessibility) projects. The lack of them has been constantly reducing the area's attractiveness and partially explains the disparities encountered, especially in municipalities with low density and located in the mountains or valleys.

The education sector's projects appear to be tailored to increase the social and intellectual capital not only of students but also of civil society as a whole. As claimed by Glaeser (2011), cities depend on human capital and the relationship between skilled and educated people to thrive. The facility's renewed role, including extracurricular activities on different topics (territorial affairs and vocational training) and a greater linkage between students and entrepreneurs, is suitable for developing endogenous potential.

As for healthcare, teleassistance, digital consultation, and vehicles that bring more people and medicines are significant improvements, especially in mountainous territories. For now, the centralisation of education, health services, and facilities seems logical to reduce the adverse impacts of socioeconomic and cultural attractiveness outside the inner area. The lack of staff jeopardises education and healthcare's quantitative and qualitative systems and services. However, centralisation, in this case, implies commuting/travelling. Hence, mobility and accessibility projects must have the expected result. The imbalances in terms of accessibility found on the shores of the lake hamper the growth of the inner area and partly validate the preference for municipalities bordering the lake on the northern and southern parts. The increase in lake crossings at different points, intermodal services, connectivity, and synchronisation with the rail network will address spatial injustices by augmenting opportunities and choices regardless of where they live.

Clearly, the inner area's socioeconomic development and the reduction of local disparities depend on the effective approaches to linking lake shores and connecting the municipalities bordering the lake with those in the mountains, hills and valley bottoms. There is a difference in quality and quantity in terms of infrastructure and services available to the municipalities near the lake that needs to be balanced. On the other hand, there is untapped territorial capital in the mountains. The next local strategy must follow Molina Ibánez (2019) notion. The scholar defends that depopulated rural areas and small and medium-sized towns should seen not as 'problem territories' but as 'opportunity territories' given the land production, quality of life, sustainability, and cultural tourism that these spaces can offer.

The fight against spatial injustices could be managed by involving other scientific, academic and third-sector organisations (bringing new visions and topics to include in the strategy and driving the projects). There is the possibility of implementing sustainable and more balanced tourism activities that connect with those in the southern part (Lecco, Varena, Bellagio, Menaggio and Como) and extend across inner area limits. However, caution and scientific knowledge are needed so that citizens' quality of life is not threatened by the various problems that tourism can induce (gentrification, second homes, seasonality, overloading of local infrastructures, pollution, and loss of identity).

Although the Framework Programme Agreement tool, 'Accordo di Programma Quadro', specifics the projects, the local strategy was shallow in this respect. The intervention topics were the main sources for identifying and understanding the interventions and establishing links with the spatial justice dimension. It could have better detailed the mobility and tourism area's projects, lake and mountain routes, the municipalities that need the most support and types of services, and created maps or schemas showing points of interest, itineraries, historical tracks, and natural parks, for instance.

Conclusively, besides additional projects for administrative capacity-building, to overcome the fragmentation of governance and counterattack spatial injustices, the strategy and local interventions for the 'next' Programming Period (2021-2027) must include new (data) analyses about the existing obstacles, barriers, and, above all, the possibilities arising from the natural ecosystems and the territory in general. Local action groups, partnerships with companies that manage the lake and regional and local public transport, and technical knowledge of European Union funds and instruments may be the key to designing projects beyond essential public services.

References

BARCA, F., CASAVOLA, P. & LUCARELLI, S. (2014). A strategy for inner areas in Italy: Definition, objectives, tools and governance. Materiali UVAL, 31, 1-66.

COMITATO NAZIONALE AREE INTERNE (2022). Rapporto di Istruttoria per la Selezione delle Aree Interne, Regione Lombardia.

COMUNE DI TACENO (2018). Strategia D'area: Alto Lago di Como e Valli del Lario.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2022). Cohesion in Europe towards 2050: eighth report on economic, social and territorial cohesion. Publications Office of the European Union.

GLAESER, E. (2011). Triumph of the City: How Urban Spaces Make Us Human. New York: Pan Macmillan.

GLENN, B. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method. Qualitative Research Journal, 9, pp. 27-40.

HARVEY, D. (2008). The Right to the City. New Left Review, 53, 23-40.

MCCANN, P. (2020). Perceptions of regional inequality and the geography of discontent: insights from the UK. Regional Studies, 54(2), 256–267.

MACKINNON, D., BÉAL, V. & LEIBERT, T. (2024). Rethinking 'left-behind' places in a context of rising spatial inequalities and political discontent. Regional Studies, pp. 1-6.

MADANIPOUR, A., SHUCKSMITH, M. & BROOKS, E. (2022). The concept of spatial justice and the European Union's territorial cohesion, European Planning Studies, 30:5, pp. 807-824.

MOLINA IBÁÑEZ, M. (2019). Dimensión territorial de la despoblación: Aproximación al papel de las políticas públicas en un entorno europea, en 'España: Geografías por un Estado posmoderno', Farinós Dasí, J., Ojeda Rivera, J.F., Trillo Santamaría, J.M., AGE/Geocrítica (Madrid/Barcelona)

MITECO (2021). Plan de Recuperación: 130 medidas ante el Reto Demográfico.

RODRÍGUEZ-POSE, A. (2018). The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it). Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society, 11(1), pp. 189-209.

SHUCKSMITH, M., BROOKS, E. & MADANIPOUR, A. (2021). LEADER and Spatial Justice. Sociologia Ruralis, 61, pp. 322-343.

SOJA, E. (2009). The City and Spatial Justice. In Bret, B. et al. (Eds.), Justice et injustices spatiales. Presses Universitaires de Paris Nanterre, Paris, pp. 56-72.

SUSAN, F. (2014). The just city. International Journal of Urban Sciences, 18, 1-18.