Cohesion and place-based policies post-emergency in the EU: Why monitoring is more important than ever

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The present report reviews the necessary ingredients for successful place-based policies. It then explores the extent to which monitoring and territorial policies tailored to different regional and local contexts have been incorporated or translated into national policies in ordinary and emergency times. To this end, we perform a comparative textual analysis of three policy documents. The Barca Report (2009) is the foundational document for place-based policy approaches; the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas represents an explicit application of a place-based approach to account for monitoring in ordinary times; finally, the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan is an implicitly place-sensitive policy enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude that monitoring, which is of paramount importance under normal circumstances, becomes even more vital in emergency times.

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The series of six OECD-EC High-Level Workshops on "Place-Based Policies for the Future" consider place-based policies from the following angles: (1) how place-based policies have evolved; (2) the articulation of place-based policies against other policymaking frameworks; (3) how place-based policies can address current and future societal problems; (4) policy design, measurement and evaluation; (5) governance and coordination; and, (6) what place-based policies are required for the future.

The outputs of the workshops are a series of papers and a summary report that outlines future directions for place-based policies. This work will ultimately be relevant for policymakers at all levels of government who are interested in improving the design and implementation of place-based policies to contribute to equitable and sustainable economic futures.

The workshops support the work of the OECD Regional Development Policy Committee and its mandate to promote the design and implementation of policies that are adapted to the relevant territorial scales or geographies. The seminars also support the work of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) of the European Commission. The financial contributions and support from DG REGIO are gratefully acknowledged.

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Executive Summary

The European Union has long recognized the importance of territorial cohesion and the reduction of spatial unevenness, pursuing it through the Cohesion policy. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this became an "emergency tool" to save some member states (especially those struck the hardest, such as Italy) from collapsing. Precisely in this perspective, the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan was launched, an impressive program amounting to over €800 billion, of which €723.8 billion belongs to the Recovery and Resilience Facility from which the member states can tap into by presenting National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs). Although territorial cohesion was still recognized as a priority, it was now one of many, and that was reflected, although in varying measure, in the different NRRPs. This, coupled with the necessity to prepare NRRPs in a hurry, meant that there was very limited room for territorial policies that were tailored to the different regional and local contexts. The worry is therefore now that the money once devoted to cohesion, albeit fundamental to save a whole country, might not result in the reduction of internal regional disparities and, in fact, it might benefit more those already better off. Keeping this in mind, monitoring, which is of paramount importance under normal circumstances, becomes even more vital in emergency times to avoid mistakes that are serious, costly and difficult to correct in the future.

In the present report, after reviewing the necessary ingredients for successful place-based policies, we explore to what extent and how monitoring has been incorporated or translated into national policies in ordinary and emergency times. To this end, we perform a comparative textual analysis of three policy documents: the Barca Report (2009), that is the foundational document articulating and shaping the identity, rationale, purpose and direction of a place-based approach; the official text of the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), an explicit application of a place-based approach to account for monitoring in ordinary times; and the Italian NRRP, to examine monitoring in emergency times in the case of a policy that, as for its goals, should be implicitly place-sensitive. The Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas, although with some lack of details on the operational applications of some of the interventions in that direction, has mostly incorporated the indications of the place-based approach, focusing on monitoring outcomes. With the NRRP a step backward seems to have been made. A move back to a centralisation of monitoring activities (from the identification of output/outcome indicators to the related collection of information), its interpretation as a technical function, a renewed focus on expenditures and financial reporting as well as a limited public debate seem to point to this direction. Much effort and scholarly and policy-making reflection (fostering a dialogue between the two) are still needed for an effective monitoring; one that will be capable of producing policy learning and that will keep policies always moving forward, having learnt from and building on the past.

1 Introduction

The European Union has long recognized the importance of "territorial solidarity" among different regions. In fact, the identification of the need for a coordinated solution to reduce regional imbalances dates back as far as the 1960s with the creation of the Directorate General for Regional Policy in 1968. However, it was in the 1980s, with the single market looming and the accession of Greece, Portugal and Spain, that the foundation for a proper "Cohesion policy" was laid. In 1988 with the reform of structural funds, known as the "Delors I" package[1], it became clear that reducing economic and social disparities between poorer and richest regions was a priority. Since then, Cohesion Policy was subject to several changes and adjustments, while simultaneously growing. In 1992 a proper "Cohesion Fund" was created and in the period 1994-1999 the resources devoted to cohesion amounted to about one-third of the total EU budget. In 2000-2006 the accession of ten new member states gave new impulse to the policy, increasing its budget to €235 billion. That became €347 billion for 2007-2013 and €351 for 2014-2020, then Covid struck.

Suddenly, Europe found itself in a state of emergency and priorities changed. Something needed to be done and quickly, first and foremost to save human lives, but also to help families and businesses, which were struggling also financially, because of the many restrictions imposed to contain the sanitary crisis. Cohesion policy was less a matter of fighting long-standing regional imbalances and more an "emergency tool" to save the member states (especially those struck the hardest, such as Italy) from collapsing. Precisely in this perspective, the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan was launched, an impressive program amounting to over €800 billion, of which €723.8 billion belongs to the Recovery and Resilience Facility (€385.8 billion loans and €338.0 grants), an immense "pot" of money from which the member states can tap into by presenting National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs).

In the first half of 2021 most member states submitted their NRRPs, which varied greatly in terms of amount requested, mix of grants and loans and allocations to the six pillars identified by the EU, i.e. green transition, digital transition, smart sustainable and inclusive growth, social and territorial cohesion, health economic social and institutional resilience, and polices for the next generation. Although territorial cohesion was still recognized as a priority, it was now one of many, and that was reflected, although in varying measure, in the different NRRPs. This, coupled with the necessity to prepare NRRPs in a hurry, meant that the room for territorial policies, really tailored to the different regional and local contexts, was very limited. The worry is therefore now that the money once devoted to cohesion, albeit fundamental to save a whole country, might not result in the reduction of internal regional disparities and, in fact, it might benefit more those already better off.

Keeping this in mind, monitoring, which is of paramount importance under normal circumstances, becomes even more vital to avoid serious and costly mistakes difficult to correct in the future. To discuss this, we will start from reviewing what are the necessary ingredients for successful place-based policies and why these were lacking, especially in the post-Covid period. We will then progress to analysing monitoring within the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) which in recent years has been the main tool to deploy placed-based interventions in the Italian peripheral areas. Finally, we will compare this with the case of the Italian NRRP, the largest NRRP in Europe in absolute value, the second (after Greece) in percentage of national GDP and the one with the largest percentage of loans over the total amount requested. In doing so, particular attention will be given to the way monitoring is treated in policy documents.

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[1] Named after the then President of the Commission Jacques Delors.

2 Building blocks of successful place-based policies

Despite the increasing amount of money invested by the European Union towards cohesion in previous decades, the "*European countries entered the pandemic phase while within them territorial inequalities were already widening*" (Carrosio et al., 2022, p. 2). There was therefore a need for the NRRPs to still actively address regional imbalances with territorially targeted interventions. Unfortunately, with little time to prepare the national plans, everything became very centralised with a clear "top-down" approach and the territorial dimension was severely underplayed. In prioritising the "macro" recovery (i.e., that of a country as a whole, rather than focusing on internal imbalances), many solutions were not tailored to the different territorial contexts and there was very little sensitivity to territorial diversity. We will get back to this when analysing in detail the Italian case, but first it is important to spell out what are the ingredients for successful place-based policies.

To clearly identify and discuss the key elements of effective place-based policies, we have to recognise that the definition of place-based policies itself evolved over time, also thanks to the huge amount of both academic and policy debate surrounding them. First, the traditional dichotomy between people-centred and place-based policies was overcome by the awareness that, in fact, there is a continuous spectrum between the two, with different policies having elements of both (e.g. Oliveira Martins et al., 2010). Traditionally, employment policies had a stronger people-focus, targeting specific groups (e.g. long-term unemployed, disabled, women) irrespective of their locations, while programmes such as the employment zones (EZ) or working neighbourhood pilots (NWP) were clearly location specific. However, other policies, e.g. in the education sector, mixed elements of both types of policies, targeting certain age groups in specific underprivileged areas (Griggs et al. 2008). In Italy, an example of a policy that mixed place-and people-based was, for instance, the initial contribution given to house owners affected by the 2009 earthquake in L'Aquila. While the subsidy was place-specific, as it was only for owners of houses destroyed by the earthquake, it was given directly to people who could then relocate[2].

Second, especially thanks to the so-called Barca report (2009), the initial "compensatory" logic of place-based policies, where aid was more in the form of subsidies and/or financing of local infrastructures, took a back seat in favour of a more optimistic view based on the idea that there is a lot of local untapped potential for growth, which requires the active involvement of local actors to be exploited. Third, it became also clear that administrative units might not be the best intervention perimeter. In fact, the definition of local areas should be more functional, based on common features, whether these are related to the labour market or other type of necessity. An example of this is represented by the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas, where "inner areas" are groups of municipalities (often quite small) joining forces to define a common economic development strategy and common needs for essential services (education, health, transportation) to be fulfilled.

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[2] https://www.opendatalaquila.it/quanti-e-dove-sono-gli-alloggi-equivalenti-dellaquila/

Following the rationale of the Barca report, at least four fundamental dimensions are to be carefully considered in devising place-based policies:

- The territorial dimension
- Participation and public debate
- The role of the public administration (PA) with the connected multilevel governance dimension
- The importance of monitoring and evaluation

2.1 The territorial dimension

For truly effective place-based policies, it is important to define the proper territorial dimension and then devise policies that reflect territorial specificities. As Demblans et al. (2020) well state *""one size fits all" solutions cannot effectively grasp the complexity and the diversity of territories at international, national and subnational levels*" (p. 225). Often, the chosen territorial dimension is not the most appropriate. This was also the case of cohesion policy with its "objective" regions (NUTS2), which were too large to catch all the complexity hidden inside them. Some NRRPs did even worse, just reverting to even larger territorial divisions. This has been the case, for instance, of Italy, where the only territorial dimension explicitly mentioned in terms of allocation of resources is the historical North-South divide. One of the constraints in the Italian NRRP is, in fact, that 40% of resources should be allocated to the South (so-called Mezzogiorno), with no further distinction by region, degree of peripherality or any other criterion. There are no indices of priority based on necessity, level of development, lack of services and so on. This represents a considerable step back from the more recent National Strategy for Inner Areas that had the merit of trying to identify smaller geographical areas of interventions made of groups of peripheral municipalities (with a variable geometry) with similar needs, deciding to work together to develop a common strategy for their future.

2.2 Participation and public debate

As McCann (2021) clearly states "while traditional regional policies were top-down in nature and designed by central government, modern place-based approaches aim to dovetail both bottom-up and top-down actions initiatives spanning the private, civil society and public sectors" (p. 7).

There are several "levels of intensity" of public participation in building policies, going from simple unidirectional information to consultation, to proper co-creation and empowerment.

In the post-Covid period a substantial step back was taken in terms of participation and public debate in devising regional policies. In an emergency management logic, the NRRPs were prepared very quickly, leaving no time for public debate and participation in the construction phase. Carrosio et al. (2022) analysing the NRRPs of Italy, Spain and Portugal find a "gloomy picture" on participation in all three countries, although the case of Italy seems particularly problematic with "a marked deficiency in participation…Civil society had no role in defining the plan and is not considered strategic for monitoring purposes." (p. 42). This was, of course, partly a result of the rush with which the national plans had to be prepared, combined with the effects of Covid, which reduced face-to-face interactions. However, it is surprising how little participation there was not only in the overall preparation of the plan, but also in the choice of large infrastructural projects, which were often just decided by the regional administrations.

Participation was limited to some very weak forms of consultation or unilateral information.

While this is in general problematic, it is even more so for place-based policies, which, by definition, require the active participation of the local community and a public debate which is informed (i.e. with adequate information on objectives and means), open (i.e. where views and knowledge from "outside circles" are being searched for), heated if necessary (i.e. where radical voices can speak and be listened to) and reasonable (i.e. where objections are properly addressed). Only by factoring in these elements, one can collect the fragmented knowledge available in the different territorial contexts and put it to a fruitful use to device effective place-based policies. As Carrosio et al. (2022, p. 3) well state "the knowledge that supports innovation resides in places, it is dispersed among the people who live there". Some good examples of this can be found in the Italian Inner Areas National Strategy (SNAI), where the SNAI coordinators often organised open debates with the local community to help them define their long-term development strategy. The hope is to find more room for participation and public debate in the implementation phase (although time is pressing also in this phase). Monitoring is key to ensure this.

2.3 Public administration and multilevel governance

Multilevel governance is another essential element of effective place-based policies. The active participation of different tiers of local, regional and national government, working together for a common goal, is as important as the participation of the civil society. In fact, many have underlined that, because of the distribution of jurisdiction among different authorities, multi-level governance is almost unavoidable in Cohesion policy (e.g. Piattoni & Polverari, 2016). Where misalignments in the different levels of governance appear, place-based policies are destined to fail.

The successful coordination of different levels of government goes hand in hand with institutional quality and, in turn, institutional quality and the quality of the local public administration are correlated. Many countries in Europe, including Italy, were hit hard by the austerity policy imposed in the aftermath of the 2008-09 crisis and entered the 2020s with a public administration understaffed and, most of all, severely underskilled (because of the lack of generational turnover). Moreover, this underskilling, e.g. in the use of digital technologies (and not necessarily only "new", but also quite standard), suffers from a very high degree of regional heterogeneity, with the weakest regions being in the worst position. This was already affecting the ability of some places to properly implement Cohesion policy initiatives, but became an even bigger issue with the NextGeneration EU program, given the short-time frame connected to it. The renewal of the public administration, long overdue, is a necessary precondition for any territorially tailored policy and should have been pursued before deploying the NRRPs resources. Not doing so is clearly penalizing the weakest parts of the countries, with a high risk of widening, rather than narrowing, internal regional disparities. The Italian NRRP calls the renewal of the PA an "enabling" condition. Yet, the plan itself does little to achieve this, with the majority of the (temporary) recruitment being in the Trial Office (22,190 jobs out of a total of 24,000 provided for by the plan). Only 2,800 technicians are to be added to strengthen local authorities, even though these local territorial units will manage almost 35% of the total resources (a total close to €70 billion). Viesti (2023, p. 53) calls the Italian NRRP a *"Piano dei Sindaci"* (a plan of the mayors). Although most European NRRPs were constructed following a very centralized top-down approach, the handling of the resources and the implementation of the projects are very decentralized. Another issue where the quality of the local PA becomes crucial is in the allocation of resources. A sizeable amount of funds is allocated via public tenders, and this is problematic when strong larger municipalities can compete with smaller (and weaker) municipalities. It is obvious that larger municipalities have higher chances of winning these public tenders, because they can rely on more personnel, often with specific training and capabilities to answer these tenders. Taking as an example the Italian Inner Areas, some of the municipalities belonging to them are so small that there is little more than just the mayor himself/herself. This makes it impossible to provide timely answers to the public tenders laid down in the NRRP and/or to do so with well-thought-out projects. Moreover, in the Italian NRRP there is almost no incentive for municipalities to join forces to present shared projects. The reward system to foster collaboration and

cooperation among small municipalities (which is key to reach some "critical mass") is virtually inexistent, while it was the very basis of the National Strategy for Inner Areas.

Monitoring

Finally, a key ingredient of place-based policies is monitoring and evaluation. A few more words are required on this topic, because it is surprisingly very often overlooked. Yet, without monitoring and evaluation there is no way to learn, from the present (monitoring) or from the past (ex-post evaluation). For the sake of this report, we will focus on **monitoring**.

a) What should we monitor?

Simply put, monitoring means to regularly check the progress and quality of a project. It seems natural to do so especially with large public investments. Yet, as McCann (2021) points out, this has been one of the major problems with Cohesion policy especially in its first periods. In 2011, at the time of the Barca report, Barca and McCann wrote a document entitled *"Outcome Indicators and Targets – Towards a New System of Monitoring and Evaluation in EU Cohesion Policy'"* in which they stress the need for Cohesion policies to be more **outcome**-oriented, where the outcomes are meant to capture the improvement in people's well-being and not just in the national accounts statistics. Well-being, and not just financial returns or productivity (Barba Navaretti and Markovic, 2021) is centre stage, although the ways it can be measured vary according to the specific aim of the project (e.g. less inequality, more access to services and so on). Inputs and outputs are just means to an end. In this framework "*policy actions, by allocating (spending) financial resources (the inputs) are aimed at producing planned outputs through which intended outcomes in terms of people's well-being are expected to be achieved*" (Barca and McCann, 2021, p. 4). Often the lack or bad quality of the monitoring (and later evaluation) comes from a bad definition of the objectives and targets of the policies themselves. As McMaster and Kah (2017) well summarise, there must be "*clear, measurable milestones and targets*". The first step for an effective monitoring is then to define **WHAT we are monitoring**, i.e. a proper **definition of expected outcomes**.

Too often monitoring is confused with simple **reporting**. Reporting has inputs as main object, and it is done mainly for accountability purposes. Beneficiaries are required to report how much they spent, and on what, to show progress and unlock additional monetary resources. Sometimes reporting on outputs is also required (e.g. jobs created). However, neither inputs spent, nor simple outputs are enough to effectively monitor cohesion programs. In fact, monitoring should show **on-going progress towards ex-ante identified outcomes** in terms of people's well-being, e.g. in the reduction of poverty or inequalities (gender, territorial, inter-generational).

Outcomes are, in a sense, wider in scope than single outputs and several indicators might be necessary for each single outcome. Barca and McCann (2021) come to the aid with actual examples of possible outcomes of Cohesion policies, such as increased mobility, increase of competences, reduction of jobless households and so on. Not all countries or all regions have to choose the same outcomes to achieve, so that the framework is flexible enough to adapt to different territorial contexts.

b) Data collection: Quality and transparency

Once the first crucial (and challenging) step of identifying the outcomes is done, monitoring itself is collecting **DATA** to create meaningful indicators of ongoing progress. Without detailed micro-data on the single interventions, it is impossible to the draw conclusions on the territorial effects of the policies, e.g. how many jobs were created in the local economy, if and how entrepreneurial activities increased, whether accessibility to essential services improved and so on. This step is where most public policies fail. Data on public policies are generally scarce and bad quality.

The reasons are many. First, public intervention includes different projects, often **very large in number** or in beneficiaries. Collecting good data on individual projects requires a considerable amount of resources (money, time, people), which are often lacking, especially in contexts where it is already difficult to even spend all the money received. The different projects involve many local actors, both in the public and private sector, and each of them possesses a little bit of the knowledge required for proper monitoring and evaluation. Collecting and collating this knowledge is not an easy task, and there is a clear trade-off between time taken and quality of the data. While recognizing that it is impossible to have perfect knowledge, it is however important to underlie that often the data collected fall short of what it is acceptable. A more intense effort needs to be made to collect more data and make them publicly available to whomever wants to access them, even if it costs more time and money.

Second, part of the data must come from the **beneficiaries** themselves, but they have **very little incentive** to provide data beyond the necessary ones for simple accountability purposes. It is hard for individuals to grasp the significance of supplying reliable and detail data. Implementing the project takes priority, while any other ancillary fulfilment is simply seen as a waste of time (and hence money). This is a good example of the Benthamian utilitarianism not working in maximizing social welfare, as a degree of collective conscience and altruism would bring extra benefits to society. However, the "degree of collective conscience" is often linked to cultural values and varies among countries. Hence, in certain territorial contexts, the only way to collect good data would be via some kind of enforcement, e.g. having more stringent data requirements to receive future money instalments.

Third, there seem to be **very little incentive** to collect data not only for the beneficiaries, but also for **central and local governments**. Collecting data imposes a great burden on them in the short-term, while the benefits of good monitoring might accrue only later. Garrì (2010) talks about political "short-termism", meaning that there is an incentive for political leaders to prefer whatever gives an immediate pay-off, even if sub-optimal, rather than something with a better pay-off, but delayed. In fact, as Offe (2015) clarifies "*the implementation of promising long-term strategies is obstructed by the failure of 'presentist' electorates fixated on a short-term time horizon to grant them green light* (for re-election)" (p. 42). Piketty (2016) called it "*short-sighted selfishness*" (p. 103). Moreover, monitoring puts the work done by the Government under the microscope. The principal-agent problem (Williamson, 1975) is well-known in economics. When a person is in charge of representing and taking decisions for other individuals (as it is the case of politicians), the interests are not always aligned. This might lead to actions that are not optimal for those represented[3]. Moreover, if the decision makers are not bearing the full cost of their actions, there is also a problem of moral hazard, i.e. since politicians do not internalize risky decisions, they might more easily take them. In this case, while monitoring and evaluation are in the interest of the population, they might not be in the best interest of those in charge. In fact, if the results are not satisfactory, this could have political repercussions.

The fear of some kind of principal-agent problem, i.e. some conflict of interest between the people and who is in charge of representing and deciding for them, is at the basis of monitoring initiatives by civil society, where the citizens themselves try to collect and organize data and make them publicly available in an open format. The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in monitoring Cohesion structural funds has been studied by Batory and Cartwright (2011). Looking at the participation of CSOs in monitoring committees in Austria, Hungary and Slovakia, they reach the conclusion that, while the inclusion of CSOs was controversial, they "*provide important opportunities for networking and information exchange for a wide and diverse set of actors and should therefore certainly be regarded as a useful part of the institutional structure*" (p. 714). In Italy, a good example where the government made a true effort to collect data and make them easily available to citizens is "Open Coesione" (Open Cohesion). This was a governmental initiative with the explicit aim of "*promoting the effectiveness of interventions through the publication of*

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[3] Bachtler and Ferry (2015) apply the principal-agent model to study the control mechanisms in European Union Cohesion Policy and the relationship between the European Commission and the member states.

data on the projects funded and broad civic participation" (https://opencoesione.gov.it/en/progetto). It now includes databases for the two completed Cohesion program cycles of 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, and data on the ongoing 2021-2027 cycle. There is also a specific section dedicated to the National Monitoring System at the core of which there is "*the unified database fed, at the individual project level, by the local information systems of all the public bodies responsible for plans or programmes financed by cohesion funding based on common rules and standards.*" (https://opencoesione.gov.it/en/sistema_monitoraggio/). The data, all in open format, are organized not only according to the cohesion cycle, but also by type of intervention, theme (e.g. research & innovation, energy, environment, social inclusion & health, education & training, and so on) and region of intervention (NUTS2 level). Open data are a necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition for transparency, which is at the core of effective monitoring. Although there are also privacy aspects to consider, often data supposed to be "public" are still not "accessible", meaning that citizens find it difficult to easily find them. The idea behind open data projects is exactly that of making these supposedly public data easily "usable" by any citizen interested.

Finally, even assuming everyone's good faith and maximum effort in monitoring, there is a fourth reason why the process proves difficult. Large programs, such as the Cohesion Policy, include a large number of projects, which, by their own nature, are meant to be deployed in **very different territorial contexts,** often peripheral. There is a great heterogeneity in the regional administrative capabilities of different regions of the European countries. In Italy, for example, the differences between the North and the South of the country are well-known as are those between central and more peripheral locations (so-called "inner areas"). It is unreasonable to expect all places to be equally efficient and careful in collecting data, which results in quantitative and qualitative differences in them. This, in turn, is problematic when trying to **collate** them centrally in a single coherent database.

c) Building outcome indicators

Once the initial two hurdles of defining target outcomes and collecting data are overcome, the final step is to build meaningful outcome indicators.

As Barca and McCann (2011) well state, once an outcome is chosen, "*for it to become the centre of attention and public debate it must be represented by appropriate measures.*" These measures are the "*outcome indicators, i.e. variables that provide information on some specific aspects of the outcome that lend themselves to be measured*" (p. 5). For example, increased mobility might be measured with travel times or increased competences with test scores or, more in general, with years of education.

In fact, this step runs often parallel, or prior, to data collection. Without a general idea of the data needed to build outcome indicators, it is impossible to collect meaningful data. However, some outcome indicators are also built ex-post and "subject to" data limitations. It is often possible to find good enough proxies to measure progress towards specific outcomes, if the data collected are rich enough and exhaustive.

3 Place-based policies in emergency

Despite all the challenges of an effective monitoring, important strides were taken in the last twenty years. This was due, first and foremost, to the recognition by the European Commission itself, of the importance of monitoring and failures of the system.

As Polverari (2016) points out, the European Commission, in its 2014 document[4], was putting more emphasis on monitoring, while also *"moving away from an excessive focus on the absorption of funding"* (p. 27) and drawing attention on *result* indicators, i.e. indicators linked to the specific objectives of the program, with the aim of measuring the effect of the investments on specific target groups. However, results indicators are not compulsory although "*they are crucial for the realisation of the results-orientation approach*" towards which Cohesion policy was moving.

In fact, several contributions through the years, both in academia and in the policy arena, have been proposing and using a set of result indicators to evaluate the effect of Cohesion policies in the different territorial contexts (e.g. Prezioso, 2008; Perucca, 2013; Fratesi and Wishlade, 2017; Bachtrögler et al., 2020). Eurostat even has a specific page on Cohesion Indicators[5] with a very informative accompanying document (Böhme et al., 2023) listing, and discussing, the different domains of well-being for which indicators have been developed: access to services of general interest, environment, governance, health, housing, life satisfaction, material well-being, safety & security, social inclusion and connectivity.

This positive trend in the evolution of the debate and practices in Cohesion policy monitoring seemed to have come to a halt with the onset of Covid-19. While still recognising, in theory, the importance of monitoring, the quality of it became rather poor in practice, especially in weak territorial contexts or in places inundated with funds. The Italian NRRP, for example, seems like a step back in terms of monitoring. The Ministry of Economics and Finance (MEF) produced a document in 2022 called "Linee Guida per lo svolgimento delle attività connesse al monitoraggio del PNRR" (Guidelines for the activities connected with the monitoring of NRRP)[6] in which the monitoring system was briefly explained. At the core of the document there is ReGiS (NRRP single management system), a new tool developed by the MEF itself for data collection and monitoring.

The system consists of three sections: Measures (NRRP Reforms and Investments), Milestones and Targets, and Projects and it is the "*tool through which the central and regional administrations concerned must fulfil their obligations to monitor, report and control the measures and projects financed by the NRRP. The central administrations in charge of the measures are required to validate the monitoring data on at*

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[4] European Commission (2014) "The programming period 2014-2020. Guidance document on monitoring and

evaluation, European Cohesion Fund, European Regional Development Funds, Concepts and Recommendations"

[5] Available online at (last accessed on June 25th 2023)

[6] Available online at https://www.rgs.mef.gov.it/_Documenti/VERSIONE-I/CIRCOLARI/2022/27/Linee-Guida-per-il-Monitoraggio-del-PNRR.pdf (last accessed June 25th 2023)

least a monthly basis by transmitting them to the Central Service for NRRP through ReGiS." (ItaliaDomani website, 2023)[7].

However, the short time frame and hurry in which the system has been developed and the projects are being deployed, are proving challenging for data collection. The ReGiS platform has been highly criticized by local administrators and accused of being of the main reason for the delay in data collection. Some mayors wrote open letters to newspapers in 2023 claiming all sorts of problems in using the system, in all phases, starting from even accessing to it (e.g. because they were supplied wrong credentials)[8]. As a result, the picture of the current situation of NRRP spending in Italy is patchy at best. Data are so unreliable that no meaningful monitoring is possible right now. Some bottom-up open data initiatives have started to try and complement the official system and make NRRP data more accessible to citizens (e.g. the NRRP open data by the Openpolis Foundation), but the situation is still quite problematic and requires more institutional attention.

The feeling is that "absorption" of resources, i.e. spending the money "on time", became again priority, with little regard on monitoring **how** the money is actually spent. In a sense, we are getting back to the logic of "*the monitoring of inputs (i.e., allocated financial resources) …limited to the control of financial dimensions (i.e., funds' absorption rate)"* (Cunico et al., 2021).

Monitoring progress towards outcomes is fundamental as a "learning" tool. As Polverari (2016) highlights monitoring *in itinere* serves not only the purpose of understanding whether the anticipated results are being obtained, but also on "*whether efforts should be re-targeted*" (p. 27). Although the national NRRPs are characterized by a certain degree of rigidity, some adjustments are possible and the only way to make them in the full knowledge of the facts, is with a "learning by failing" approach based on actual data collection. This data collection needs to be timely and not beset with excessive delays and with lack of transparency. In fact, as UNDAF (2017) highlights "*monitoring should be undertaken as close to real time as possible. Real-time monitoring approaches provide a constant flow of data and analysis to allow for timely decision-making*" (p. 4).

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[7] https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/content/sogei-ng/it/en/Interventi/regis---il-sistema-gestionale-unico-del-pnrr.html

[8] See for instance Il Sole 24Ore, Osservatorio PNRR, April 8th 2023 *"Regis non funziona e i fondi ritardano»: sos sindaci sul Pnrr"*

4 Policy monitoring in ordinary times and in emergency: An examination of the Italian case

4.1 An exploration of the conceptualization of "monitoring" in policies: The rationale for a document analysis approach

Within the huge literature on the impact of policies produced so far across different disciplines, comparatively little attention (especially with reference to assessment or evaluation) has been paid to a crucial dimension when investigating policy outcomes: monitoring (Tosun, 2012; Schoenefeld et al., 2019), and the forms it has eventually taken. It is essential to produce state-of-the-art evidence-based knowledge on the instruments which have been or are to be conceived by places at various scales to increase a policy's accountability and transparency, assess the achievements towards its objectives and its effectiveness, efficiency, results and (intended and unintended) outcomes. Evidence has a critical role to play in making better decisions and, hence, improving the quality, salience and consistency of outcomes throughout the whole policy cycle. Yet there remain many challenges with connecting evidence and decision making.

Following Lerner and Lasswell (1951), it should be acknowledged that some conditions, which affect the ability of policymaking to be rational, may limit the optimal use of information. These are, among others: bias in the conceptualization of the problem at stake, time constraints, uncertainty, incomplete information, complexity of chains of decisions in governance choices, and non-full predictability of consequences. Time constraints and lack of local/contextualized knowledge may play a major role in emergency scenarios, weakening the place-sensitiveness of policies (Carrosio et al., 2022). Reflecting the focus on the importance of geographical context in designing development policy, place-based approaches are defined as spatially sensitive and able to reduce persistent inefficiencies and inequalities by tailoring public goods and services to the particularities of local and regional contexts (McCann, 2013). In analytical terms, 2009 and 2010 saw the publication of five very influential reports on the rationale for regional development policies. These reports are: the "World Development Report" (World Bank, 2009), the Barca Report, "An Agenda for a Reformed Cohesion Policy" (Barca, 2009), two reports by the OECD, "How regions grow" (2009a) and "Regions Matter" (2009b), and the 2010 "Local Development Report" of the Corporacion Andina de Fomento (CAF, 2010). The highly influential World Bank Report adopts what is known as a "space-blind" approach, the other four account for a "place-based" approach (Barca et al., 2012).

In contrast to people-based policy, place-based policy is designed with explicit consideration of geographical context and place, because it is interpreted that space matters and shapes the potential for development of places. The complexity and particularity of geographies are addressed rather than ignored or treated in a somehow neutral way. Therefore, a place-based approach has to be understood as one

designed so as to overcome sectoral silos and address, place by place, the main hindrances to local development, untapping unused territorial capital; to combine a mission- and method-setting role of central authorities with adequate ownership and discretionality by local governments; to ensure a widespread participation and commitment of citizens, communities, trade unions and employees and a wide public debate, to foster policy learning merging local and global knowledge. The aim is to design policies which provide bundles of public goods specifically tailored to the specific challenges of the region, engaging as many local actors as possible, fostering participation between central and local governments. To address the purpose of this report, it is important to underline that this approach puts emphasis on promoting transparency regarding policy intentions, objectives, monitoring and evaluation. This typically requires the policy to be implemented with different administrative jurisdictions working in tandem (multi-level governance). In fact, as advocated by Barca et al. (2012), in contrast with the assumption that the "state knows best", which underlies a mechanistic approach presupposing that the central government has both the information and knowledge to design, implement, and also monitor the most adequate development strategies, all the dimensions and the stages of the policy cycle should lie at the intersection between – and then be negotiated among – the national and the sub-national levels, monitoring (and the choice of the practices, tools and indicators to carry it out) included.

In further developing both everyday policy monitoring practices and scholarlily understanding of them, there is a need to pay attention to their design and, more specifically, to the role of any overarching rules and their more or less binding nature, the (cognitive and financial) support for implementation, the criteria guiding the quality of the information they deliver (Schoenefeld et al., 2019), and, last but not least, the conceptualization of this relevant element of policy-making (in each stage of the policy cycle). Whether and how monitoring is effectively put in place derives in fact also from the latter. Policy design and the space it is allocated in is thus of paramount importance as a premise for effectiveness. In principle, there needs to be a clear connection between the assumed causes of the problem being addressed, the actions put in place to solve it and an insight into what a desirable, feasible outcome would be (Punziano & Urso, 2016). The fundamental argument behind this perspective is that "*beginning with a coherent conception of the policy is likely to produce a more coherent result*" (Peters, 2015: ix). It is evident that language plays a key role in policy design: it has "*the capacity to make politics*" (Hajer, Versteeg, 2005: 179) in that it shapes the way we conceive an issue, in fixing its boundaries, and delimiting the range of available strategic options. As Healey (2004) puts it, articulating the vocabulary for a spatial strategy is essentially a political process, involving struggle and selectivity, not just between different interests and power blocs but also within the terrain of the mode of analysis and representation of the policy contents.

Acknowledging the high performative power of policy documents and their importance in shaping relevant public interventions and, ultimately, in contributing to producing their final positive outcomes, we will perform a mixed-method document analysis to identify and decode the main contents associated to monitoring. Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) is a method of assessing documents in a rigorous and reliable manner through identifying the presence or absence of particular themes or issues and ultimately understanding policy contents, in ways that are not possible using other methods, as the case at stake. In fact, the two policies we will examine here are still ongoing, although at different stages, and therefore no systematic, organic information on their monitoring has been produced yet. It has to be clarified that this kind of information is at times difficult to be retrieved or not made public. Even if such data were available, however, it should be acknowledged that comparing the performance of two policies from the point of view of any indicators designed to monitor them is generally complex, as these, depending on the policy objectives, are highly specific and hence heterogeneous across policies. What can be done instead is examining the monitoring practice that was envisioned in each policy in its general terms and the tools designed to carry it out.

To explore to what extent and how monitoring is incorporated or translated into national policies in ordinary times and in emergency time, we will perform a comparative textual analysis of three policy documents: the Barca Report (2009), that is the foundational document articulating and shaping the identity, rationale,

purpose and direction of a place-based approach; the official text of the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), an explicit application of a place-based approach to account for monitoring in ordinary times; and the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan, to examine monitoring in emergency times in the case of a policy that, as for its goals, should be implicitly place-sensitive.

Research-wise, the Italian case is highly relevant in many respects: it simultaneously allows us to explore a direct policy experimentation of the place-based approach and the largest NRRP in Europe in absolute value. Given the relevance assigned to cohesion and territorial rebalance by the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), it provides us with a unique opportunity for a comparative study on the place-sensitiveness of policy monitoring.

Policy-wise, the case for policy making to adopt a place-sensitive approach is general, but it is especially important for marginalized or left-behind regions, where the local market and political forces are not enough to move them out of an under-development trap and the national and EU policy action is entrusted with this role. The ultimate aim of the analysis is to contribute to the academic and policy debate on monitoring and to its diffusion to and application in policies. Fostering an informed scholarly-policymaking dialogue on such issues is crucial to provide usable knowledge to improve both the design and implementation of policies.

The results of this research will eventually provide policy makers with:

- a greater awareness of the existence of different approaches and policy models for monitoring, each of which can be articulated in many ways and have different consequences and levels of efficiency with respect to transparency and policy learning (thereby implementing corrective measures);
- tools and methodologies for understanding the potential unintended effects of policy actions and devices, along all phases of the policy cycle;
- a comprehension of some of the challenges posed by place-based policies as well as of policy-making in emergency times.

4.1.1 Policy document analysis: Selection, methods, and tools

We selected three policy documents for our textual analysis.

To explore how monitoring was envisioned at theoretical level and to thus investigate its conceptualization, the vocabulary used to describe it and the main notions or key aspects/dimensions associated to it, we started from the foundational statement of the place-based approach, the Barca Report (2009)[9].

The second document is the official document launching SNAI[10] (2014) and the third one is the main text of the Italian NRRP (2021)[11].

For homogeneity reasons, we performed the text mining analysis in Italian because one of the documents, the NRRP, is only available in the original language while the Barca report also has an official Italian translation.

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[9] The document (in Italian and in English) is available at the following link:
http://valutazioneinvestimenti.formez.it/content/unagenda-riforma-politica-coesione
Number of pages of the Italian version document: 136.
[10] The document (in Italian and in English) is available at the following link:
https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/documentazione/
Number of pages of the Italian version document: 68.
[11] The document (in Italian only) is available at the following link: https://www.italiadomani.gov.it/content/sogei-ng/it/en/home.html
Number of pages of the document: 273.

Based on these three policy documents, we performed a mix-method policy document analysis combining *i.* a software-based analysis, using a text mining approach, and *ii.* a qualitative in-depth content analysis.

In order to extract relevant themes and concepts as well as topics of interest related to monitoring, we used Leximancer software. Leximancer is a text analytics tool exploiting machine learning that can be used to analyse the content of collections of textual documents, to identify the most frequent concepts, their relationship within the text, the co-occurrence with other words and synonyms and to display the extracted information visually. The information is displayed by means of a conceptual map that provides a bird's eye view of the material, representing the main concepts contained within the text as well as information about how they are related. A "*concept", as specified by the software,* is a group of related words that travel together throughout the text. These terms are weighted according to how frequently they occur in sentences containing the concept, compared to how frequently they occur elsewhere. Sentences are tagged as containing a concept if enough accumulated evidence is found. Terms are weighted so the presence of each word in a sentence provides an appropriate contribution to the accumulated evidence for the presence of a concept. That is, a sentence (or group of sentences) is only tagged as containing a concept if the accumulated evidence (the sum of the weights of the keywords found) is above a set threshold. Aside from detecting the overall presence of a concept in the text, the concept definitions are also used to determine the frequency of co-occurrence between concepts. This co-occurrence measure is what is used to generate the concept map. The concepts are clustered into higher-level 'themes' when the map is generated. Concepts that appear together often in the same pieces of text attract one another strongly, and so tend to settle near one another in the map space. The themes aid interpretation by grouping the clusters of concepts, and they are shown as coloured circles on the map. The themes are heat-mapped to indicate importance. This means that the "hottest" or most important theme appears in red, and the next hottest in orange, and so on according to the colour wheel (Leximancer User Guide Release 5.0). An advantage of the toll is that the map is interactive, allowing to further explore the concepts and their connection through direct a link to the portion of the original text.

Stop words (that is words with low semantic meaning, *i.e.* conjunctions) were filtered out before processing the analysis for the purpose of using only significant words from the search and hence not altering the automatic seed selection.

The second part of the analysis is performed according to the Qualitative Policy Document Analysis (QPDA) methodological framework (Bacchi, 2009; Prior, 2004) that entails an analytical process made up of the following phases: selection, familiarisation, reading, identifying extracts and developing analysis and coding/decoding through a problematized understanding of policy issues. Within this framework, documents are regarded both as informational resources to be analysed through the content/thematic analysis approach and as topics in themselves, scrutinized through the discourse analysis approach to understand how documents come into being as well as identifying the embedded themes. Bacchi (2009a), introducing the 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR) Approach, that is a is a resource intended to facilitate critical interrogation of public policies, very interestingly underlines how it starts from the premise that "*what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic (needs to change). Following this thinking, policies and policy proposals contain implicit representations of what is considered to be the 'problem' ('problem representations')*" (Bacchi, 2009b, p. 427). This echoes the reflections around the relevance of language in policies we developed in the introduction of this analytical section, and it well justifies the use of content analysis for the purpose of this study. The aim in a "WPR" analysis is therefore to read policies with an eye to discerning how the "problem" is represented within them and to subject this problem representation to critical scrutiny. In our case, we will not fully exploit all the dimensions of investigation of a "WPR" approach (this is out of the scope of this study), but we will use its assumptions to explore how monitoring and its role and functions are problematized along the policy cycle.

The main findings comparing monitoring practices across the three selected documents are organized and read through an interpretative grid, as in Carrosio et al. (2022), who examined three other relevant factors

in policy-making (namely public debate and participation, territorial dimension, and multilevel governance and Public Administration renewal) to assess the place-sensitiveness of different NRRPs.

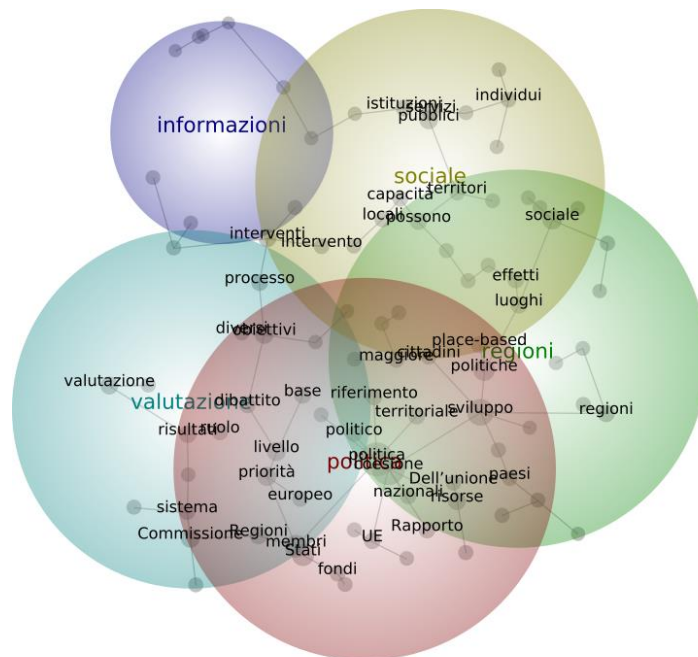## 4.2 The policy documents at a glance: Exploratory concept discovery

Before delving into the analysis of monitoring aspects, it is essential to get a first explorative overview of the main topics dealt with in each policy document.

To this end, we performed a generalized content analysis of each selected text. The related concept maps are shown in the following: they allow, on the one hand, for the identification of the emerging themes within each of them, and on the other hand, a cross-comparison among the policy documents under scrutiny.

Each concept map includes two sections: a visual display of concepts and their relationships to each other; and report tabs interacting with the concept map. The top 33% (by default) of concepts are shown in the map. These are the concepts that appear most frequently in the text, and those that are most-connected with other concepts. Concepts are clustered into higher-level "Themes", that are displayed also in the report tab. Concepts that appear together often in the same pieces of text attract one another strongly, and they thus tend to locate close to one another in the map space. The themes help the interpretation by grouping clusters of concepts, and they are shown as coloured circles on the map (Leximancer User Guide Release 5.0).
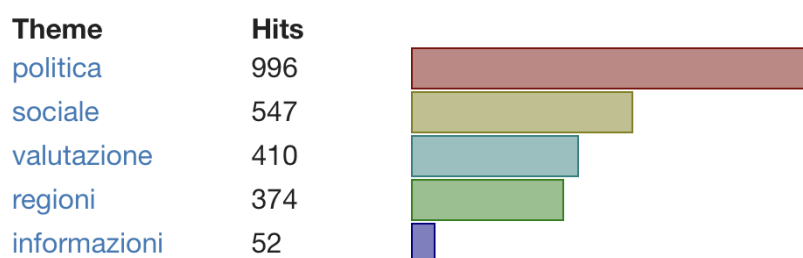
Figure 1. Barca Report - Concept map

(a)

Concepts: 33%. Theme size: 60%.

(b)

Theme	Hits
politica	996
sociale	547
valutazione	410
regioni	374
informazioni	52

(c)

Theme: **valutazione**
Concepts: valutazione, risultati, processo, dibattito, ruolo, sistema, diversi
Hits: **410**

un approccio sperimentale attraverso il quale gli attori collettivi locali possano sperimentare
soluzioni esercitando il controllo reciproco e sia attivato un sistematico processo di
apprendimento dove la valutazione di impatto abbia un ruolo di rilievo e i risultati degli
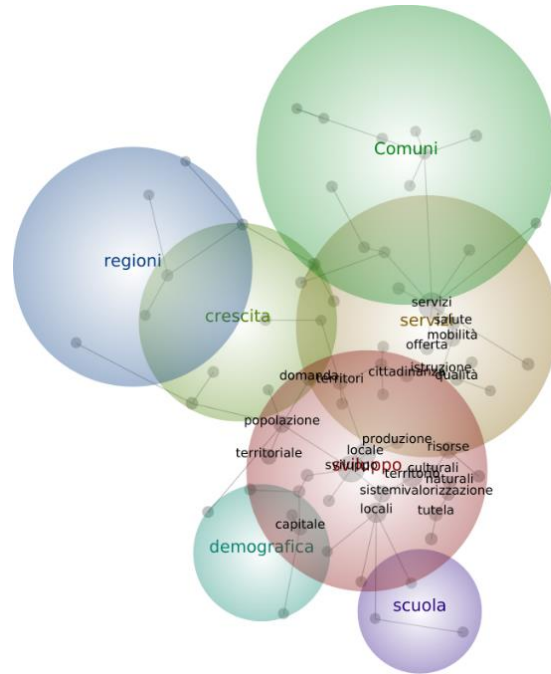interventi passati siano utilizzati per progettarne di nuovi.

This first analysis of Barca Report produced five main themes, as also shown in the bar graph (Figure 1.b). The dominant ones are "policy" (politica) and "social" (sociale), mostly due to the frequent mention to social cohesion, but also to the importance given to social aspects and interventions within the document. What is noteworthy for the purpose of this study is the emergence of the theme "evaluation" (valutazione) among the most relevant ones. Looking at the concepts mainly contributing to the higher-level, we find the following: evaluation (valutazione), results (risultati), process (processo), debate (dibattito), role (ruolo), system (sistema), different (*plural*, diversi) (Fig. 1.c), suggesting that also this aspect of policy-making has to be openly discussed in its process and that "different" systems of assessment are to be put in place:

On top of the list of the representative text excerpts contributing to form the mentioned theme (which allows you to read some examples directly taken from the original document to have a more analytical sense on how concepts in that theme appear together in the text), we find a pivotal aspect of a place-based approach which calls into question also the issue of assessment, where learning and a tried-and-tested procedure are central. In fact, among the three requisites of decision-making at the local level in this perspective there is experimentalism: "[In particular, it is necessary to ensure the following three requirements:] - *An experimental approach through which local collective actors can test new solutions by exercising mutual control and a systematic process of learning has to be activated where impact evaluation plays a prominent role and the results of past interventions are used to design new ones.*" (our translation). Finally, other relevant themes are "regions" (regioni), which are identified as a key strategic layer of government in this policy-making approach, and "information" (informazioni), an element that, as for the document, is salient for the ex-post verifiability of interventions. Analysing the excerpts, we see that the topic of the dissemination of information emerges as relevant, and we know how crucial this is in monitoring.

Exploring the official document of SNAI, the first two emerging themes by relevance (Fig. 2.a-b) are "development" (sviluppo) and "services" (servizi), which are in fact the two main axes of the strategy.
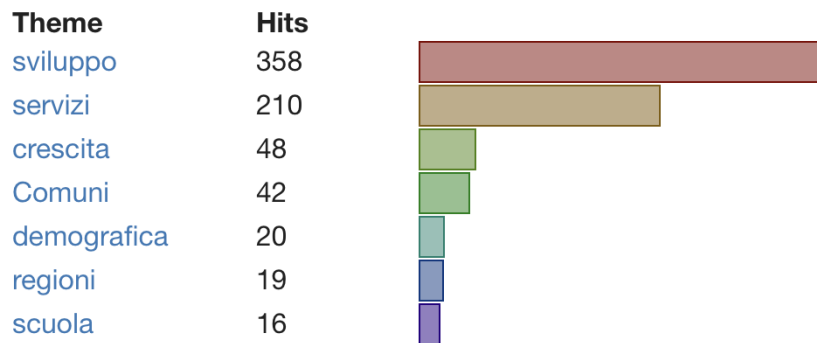
Figure 2. SNAI - Concept map

(a)

Concepts: 33%. Theme size: 50%.

(b)

Theme	Hits
sviluppo	358
servizi	210
crescita	48
Comuni	42
demografica	20
regioni	19
scuola	16

Launched in 2012 by the Italian Minister for Economic Development with the ultimate aim of halting population decline in inner areas (that is municipalities located at a considerable distance from centres providing services of general interest), its objective is twofold: *i)* improving essential services, which is considered as a prerequisite for the second goal that is needed to guarantee an adequate level of citizenship (see cittadinanza in the map), and *ii)* triggering local development processes. The strategy focuses on three services, that are all shown in the related thematic circle, namely health (salute), transport (mobilità) and education (istruzione), which, being given a special attention within the overall policy, it also forms a "theme" in itself. The main concepts contributing to the theme "development" – where much emphasis is given to "territory" and its declinations, a testament of the place-sensitiveness of the strategy

–, which help understanding the kind of growth pursued within it, are: "territory" (territorio), "systems" (sistemi), "resources" (risorse), "capital" (capitale), "protection" (tutela), "cultural" (culturali), "natural" (naturali), "enhancement" (valorizzazione), "production" (produzione), "demand" (domanda), "community" (comunità), "capacity" (capacità), "social" (sociali), "costs" (costi).
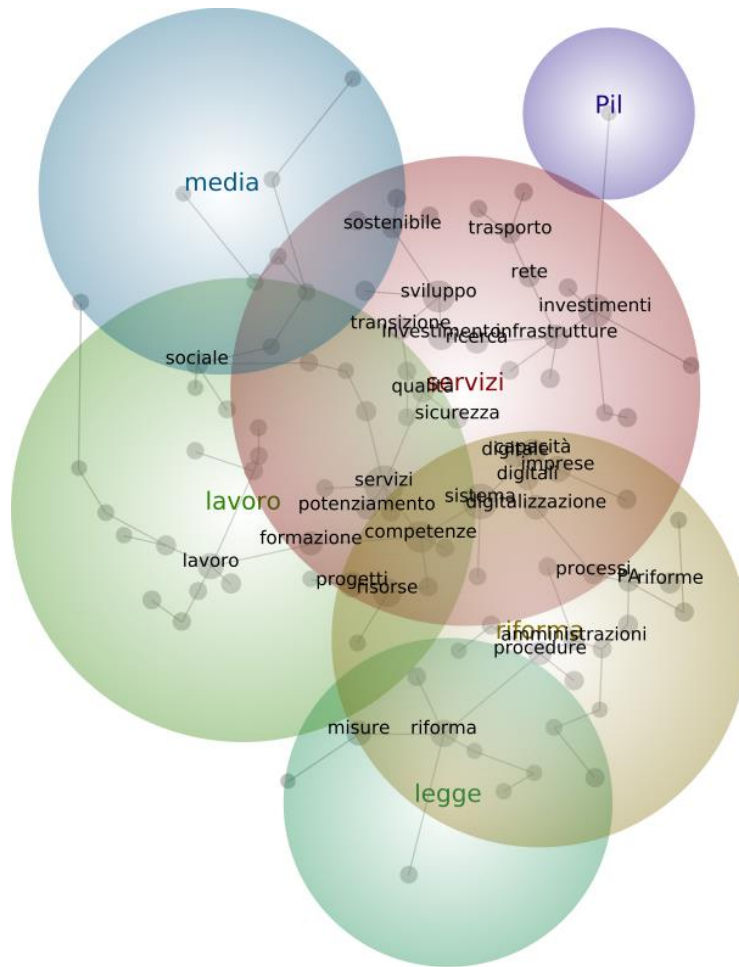
"Demographic" (demografica) "growth" (crescita) is one of the pillars of this national strategy and this explains the salience of these two themes in the results of the analysis. Two tiers of governments, the municipal (Comuni) and the regional (regioni) ones, emerge as strategic actors.

It is worth mentioning that, although below the threshold of 33% most recurring concepts (hence not visible in the map), in the general ranking, "evaluation" (valutazione) appears with a relevance by 14%. Immediately below other salient concepts are: "time" (tempo, 13%) and "data" (dati, 12%).

Moving to the last document of the selected corpus, the NRRP, a very different picture is shown by the concept map in terms of dominant themes (Fig. 3a-b). The most recurrent topic is "services" (servizi), mainly connected to improvement of digitalization and sustainability, as is clear from the presence of concepts contributing to it. This is followed by "reform" (reform) and "law" (legge), pointing to the transformative character of the plan, which also foresees a massive "package" of cross-cutting reforms, the most important ones affecting public administration towards simplification and digital transition, as the overlapping of concepts like digital and digitalization with the theme of "services" show.
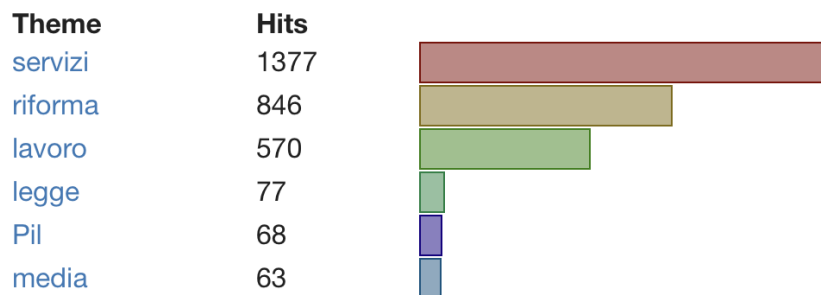
Figure 3. NRRP - Concept map

(a)

Concepts: 33%. Theme size: 60%.

(b)

Theme	Hits	
servizi	1377	
riforma	846	
lavoro	570	
legge	77	
Pil	68	
media	63	

(c)

> Theme: **riforma**
> Concepts: riforma, misure, procedure, amministrazioni, riforme, processi, PA, tempi, semplificazione, cittadini, processo, dati, tempo, monitoraggio, personale
> Hits: **846**
>
> Al fine di valutare
> l'efficacia di questi interventi di semplificazione e favorire il confronto con i cittadini, sarà sviluppato un
> nuovo, trasparente, sistema di monitoraggio dei tempi di attraversamento delle procedure per tutte le amministrazioni pubbliche. In ultimo, sarà introdotto un nuovo sistema di performance management per
> i dipendenti della **PA**, con chiari indicatori di performance e incentivi dedicati alle amministrazioni più
> efficaci.

Looking more in depth to the list of concepts clustered within this theme (Fig. 3.c), the word "monitoring" (monitoraggio) shows up. Examining the most illustrative excerpt containing them (Fig. 3.c), we understand that is mainly refers to the assessment of these interventions of simplification and to a debate with citizens: "*In order to evaluate the effectiveness of these simplification efforts and to encourage discussion with citizens, a new, transparent system for monitoring procedural timing for all public administrations will be developed. Finally, a new performance management system will be introduced for PA employees, with clear performance indicators and incentives for the most efficient administrations.*" (our translation).

Youth "employment" policies (lavoro), with an emphasis on training, emerges as another key pillar of the Italian NRRP. It is interesting to notice that the remaining two salient themes extracted by the tool are GDP ("Pil") and average ("media"). This might entail a different interpretation of the development pursued by the plan as compared to the one put forward within the two previous policy documents analysed, one that focuses more on (the growth of) GDP and on the increase of median indicators (possibly implying a convergence towards some pre-defined, space-blind standard).

Once explored the main themes which each policy document deal with through automatic concept discovery, we now focus on monitoring. To this end, we will use the Concept Profiling setting. Through these settings, the learning process discovers new concepts that are associated with selected user-defined concepts. This is thus useful for doing discriminant analysis on prior concepts, or for adding a layer of more specific concepts which expand upon a top layer of general concepts (Leximancer User Guide Release 5.0).

Results are discussed in the next session.

4.3 Conceptualisation and relevance of monitoring: Concept profiling

In the concept maps included in the previous section (Figures 1, 2 and 3), top-level ideas in each document were shown. The following concept maps are quite different, in that, in terms of hierarchy, monitoring is the main idea here as for our setting. The software, therefore, developed a theme around the concept we specified (monitoring), providing us with the main idea associated to it.

Starting from the Barca Report (Fig. 4.a), we see that the main concepts that are discovered to be related to monitoring are quite informative and illustrative of what its qualities should be from a place-based perspective. In fact, the main items building the related thesaurus are: solutions ("soluzioni"), mutual ("reciproco"), choices ("scelte"), experimenting ("sperimentare"), freedom ("libertà"), rents ("rendite"), guidance ("guida"), decision-making ("decisionale"), democratic ("democratica"), direction ("direzione"), distinction ("distinzione"), effort ("sforzo"), collective ("collettivo"), experimentation ("sperimentazione"), old ("vecchi"), collective (plural, "collettivi").

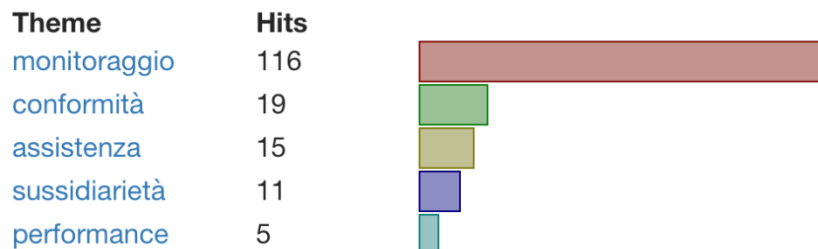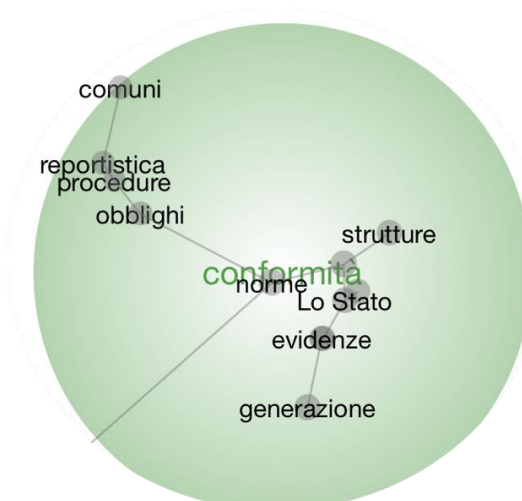## Figure 4. Barca Report – Monitoring: Concept map

(a)

Concepts: 33%. Theme size: 60%.

(b)

Theme	Hits	
monitoraggio	116	
conformità	19	
assistenza	15	
sussidiarietà	11	
performance	5	
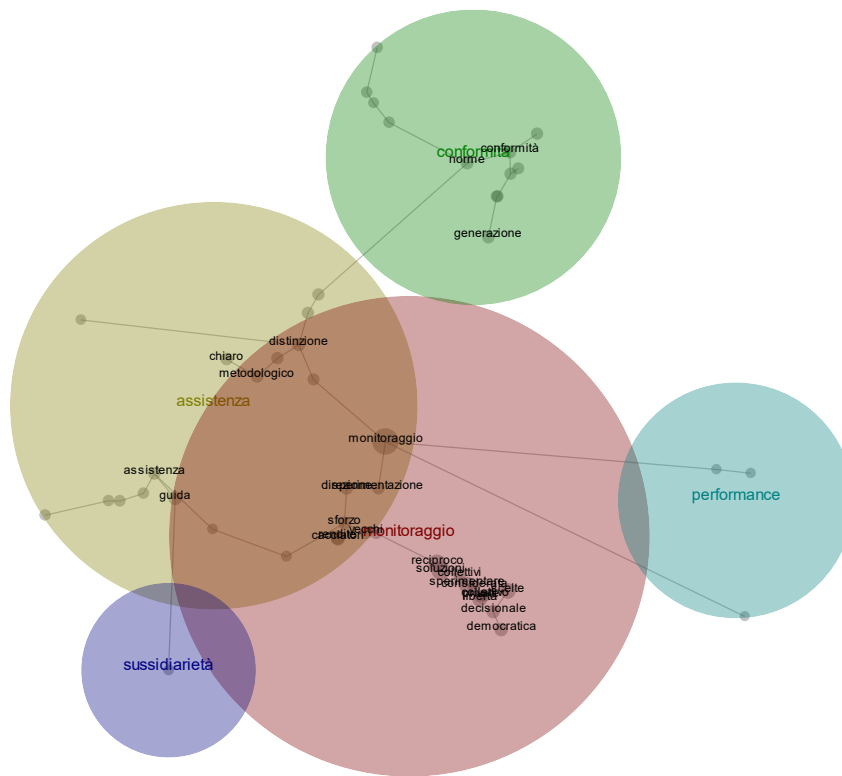
(c)

Concepts: 100%. Theme size: 60%.

Monitoring is therefore interpreted as a collective effort towards more plural, informed and democratic policy choices and solutions, based on experimentalism and mutual control among actors, aiming at discarding old rents or rent-seeking positions. Very interestingly, the other main themes connected to the concept of monitoring (Fig. 4.a-b) are compliance ("conformità"), assistance ("assistenza"), subsidiarity ("sussidiarietà"), and obviously performance.

Looking more closely within the theme "compliance" (see Fig. 4.c), the idea emerging is thus that clear norms ("norme") and procedures should be implemented in terms of monitoring duties. More specifically, it is evident (since they cluster together) how to the central State ("Stato") is demanded to "generate" norms of compliance and the needed structures for controlling the evidence ("evidenze") being produced, while municipalities ("comuni") are asked to apply monitoring procedures and to comply to the reporting requirements. This does not seem to be new. The novelty in the place-based approach, as is plain to see in the concept map, is the emphasis on (technical) assistance, on the one hand, and on subsidiarity, on the other hand, also when referring to monitoring. The main assumption seems to be that municipalities in most cases do not have the needed knowledge to effectively and regularly oversee their policy results – and in this case they would need assistance – but, being closer to the territory, they are also the entities which are more aware of which indicators and instruments are best to properly check over the achievement of the policy objectives.

This seems to suggest that, in this policy-making perspective, monitoring should be carried out through a combination of central guidance and subsidiarity.

Let us explore how the semantic model centred on monitoring looks within the National Strategy for Inner Areas (Fig. 5a-b).

The dominant, catch-all theme most frequently associated with monitoring emerging from the analysis is outcomes ("esiti"). The main recurring words clustered together in it are the following: monitoring ("monitoraggio"), access ("accesso"), (data)base ("banca"), project areas ("aree-progetto"), debate ("confronto"), timing ("tempi"), assessment ("valutazione"), Federazione ("federation"), ongoing ("itinere"), Framework Program Agreement ("Programma Quadro", "Accordi"), practices ("pratiche"), ordinary ("ordinaria"), adiministrations ("Amministrazioni"), assistance ("assistenza"), indicators ("indicatori"), sharing (condivisione"), recognition ("riconoscimento"), progresses ("progressi"), ciricalities ("criticità"), citizens ("cittadini"), open ("aperto"), selection ("selezione").

Figure 5. SNAI – Monitoring: Concept map

(a)

Concepts: 33%. Theme size: 60%.

(b)

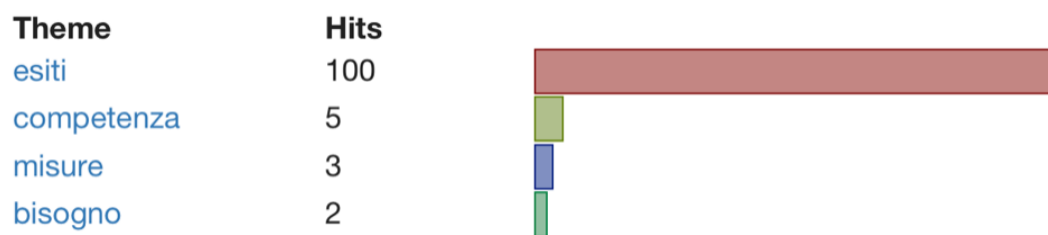| Theme	Hits	
esiti	100	
competenza	5	
misure	3	
bisogno	2	

(c)

Theme: **esiti**
Concepts: esiti, monitoraggio, accesso, banca, formale, aree-progetto, confronto, tempi, valutazione, Federazione, itinere, Programma Quadro, Accordi, pratiche, ordinaria, Enti, Amministrazioni, assistenza, indicatori, condivisione, riconoscimento, progressi, criticità, cittadini, aperto, selezione
Hits: **100**

Il complesso di questi interventi troverà sanzione formale in appositi ***Accordi*** di
Programma Quadro fra ***Enti*** locali, ***Regioni*** e ***Amministrazioni*** centrali. Le aree-progetto e i
relativi ***Accordi*** entreranno a far parte di una ***Federazione*** di progetti per le Aree interne
che offrirà molteplici servizi: monitoraggio e valutazione in itinere del rispetto dei tempi
previsti e degli esiti; confronto e assistenza in merito alle criticità; accesso a una banca dati
delle pratiche; condivisione dei progressi nel sistema degli indicatori; confronto con le
azioni di politica ordinaria.

(d)

Concepts: 100%. Theme size: 60%.
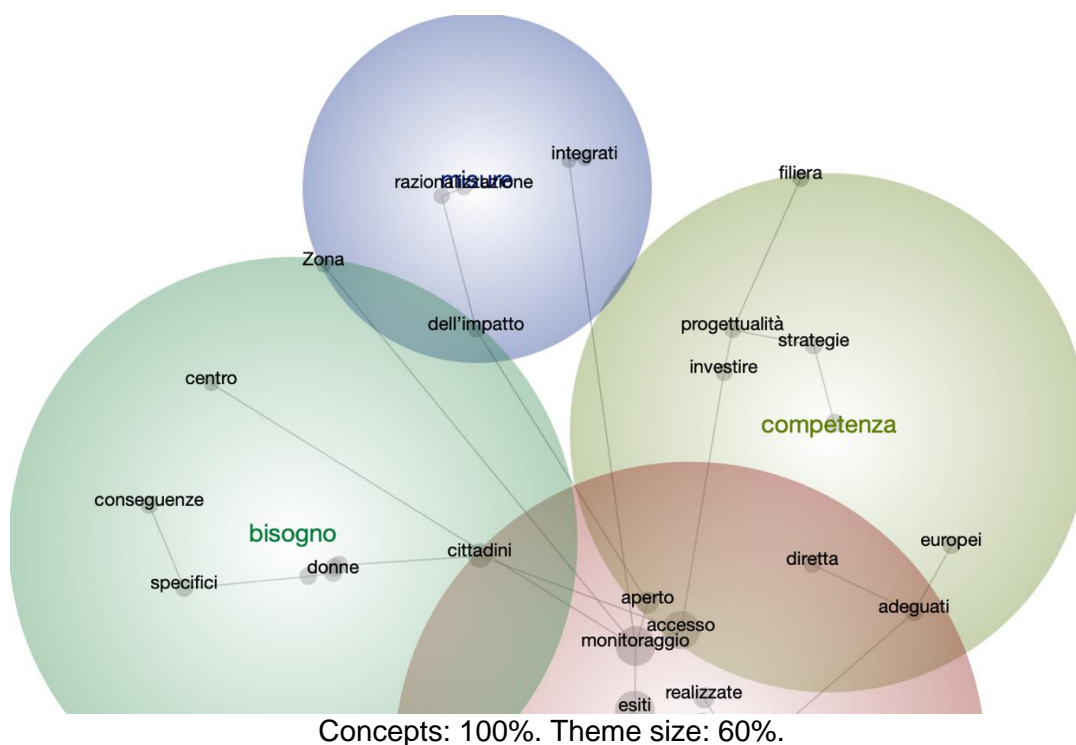
The first excerpt contributing to the theme dictionary very effectively explains how monitoring is conceived within SNAI and how its final aim is to build an open community of practices of inner areas also in the field of monitoring activities (see Fig. 5.c): "*This set of interventions will find formal recognition in specific Framework Program Agreements between local, regional and central governments. The project areas and the related Agreements will become part of a Federation of Projects for Inner Areas offering multiple*

services: monitoring and evaluation in itinere of adherence to the planned timetable and the outcomes; debate and assistance on critical issues; access to a database of practices; sharing of progress in the set of indicators; comparison with ordinary policy actions" (our translation).

Some interesting features emerge: the cooperation among the different tiers of government from the central to the municipal level (namely multi-level governance), the ongoing, constant check on outcomes across the whole policy cycle, the importance of the adherence to the agreed schedule and the defined results, the building of both a shared heritage of practices and a clear system of indicators, and finally an open discussion (as is crucial from a place-sensitive viewpoint) on criticalities and eventually guidance to overcome them.

A special attention seems to be assigned by the strategy to citizens' specific needs, and within them to women, as testified by the co-occurrence of the items specific (plural, "specifici"), need ("bisogno"), women ("donne") within the theme "need" (see Fig. 5.d – zoom in 100% on the bubbles "bisogno", "misure", "competenza"). The presence of the word "consequences" ("conseguenze") within the theme thesaurus also suggests that some attention is paid to intended and possibly unintended effects of the implemented interventions.
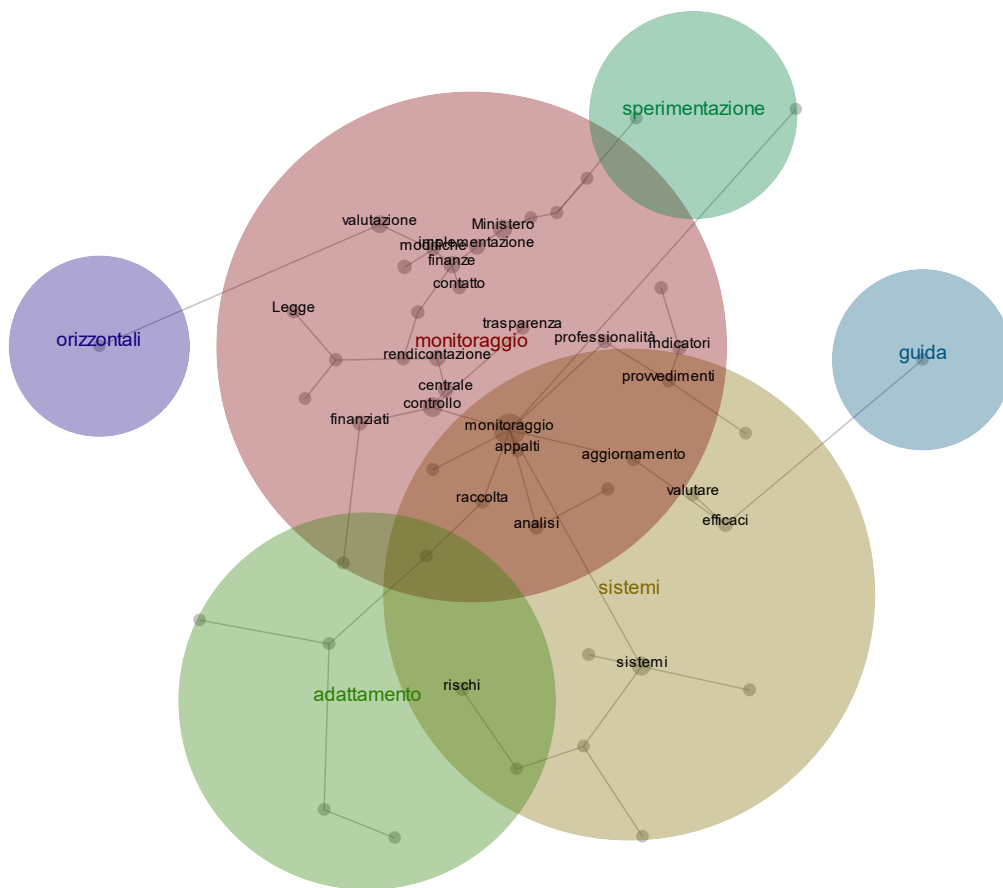
Finally, key elements in monitoring as conceived within SNAI are competence ("competenza") along all the chain ("filiera") – hence combining ("direct") local and central knowledge, and the reliance on a set on integrated ("integrati") impact ("d'impatto") measures ("misure") whose dominant emerging characteristic should be their rationalization ("razionalizzazione").

The thesaurus building the concept under scrutiny, i.e. monitoring, within the official document of the Italian NRRP is substantially different from the previous ones (Fig. 6a-b). This is evident from the list of the main concepts contributing to the theme "monitoring". These are: control ("controllo"), Ministry ("Ministero"), evaluation ("valutazione"), finance ("finanze"), reporting ("rendicontazione"), implementation ("implementazione"), central ("centrale"), funded ("finanziati"), indicators ("indicatori"), PLAN, ("PIANO"), collection ("raccolta"), contact ("contatto"), information ("informazione"), professionalism ("professionalità"), transparency ("trasparenza"), Law ("Legge"), measures ("misure", in the sense of adiministrative actions taken to achieve or deal with something), changes ("modifiche"), procurement ("appalti").

One of the exemplifying excerpts showing how in the original text these items co-occur together contributing to the concept reads as follows (Fig. 6.c): "VERIFICATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING OF THE PLAN. In order to ensure the simplification of the processes of management, control, monitoring and reporting of funded projects, and, at the same time, adhere to the principles of information, publicity and transparency prescribed by European and national regulations, the NRRP will use the information system "ReGiS" developed by the Ministry of Economy and Finance to support the implementation processes of the programs co-financed by the European Union and of the corresponding instruments of the national programming, ensuring the traceability and transparency of operations and the efficient electronic exchange of data among the different actors involved in the Governance of the Plan" (our translation). Monitoring seems to be conceived here as a merely technical operation based on effective systems ("sistemi") of indicators and updating systems, that is mostly aimed at financial reporting and accountability – as the presence of words such as reporting, financed, procurement, check seem to suggest – especially toward the European Union. Sub-national levels of government do not appear among the most frequent concepts associated with monitoring, and neither do citizens and their needs. From the text mining analysis, monitoring seems to be highly centralized, and any concept related to the semantic field of "debate" appears in the space of the cloud map. However, it foresees some experimentalism ("sperimentazione") as well as adaptation ("adattamento") and risk management, although they probably refer to spending obligations.

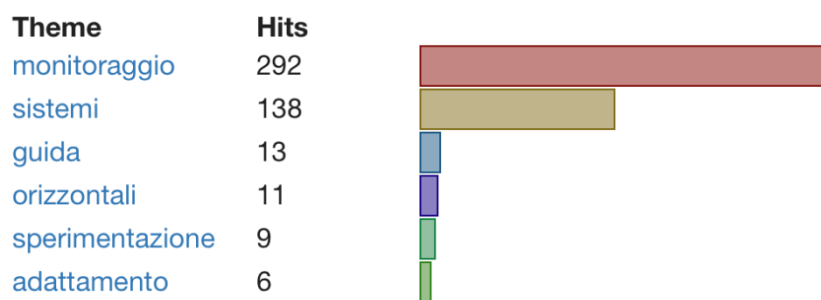## Figure 6. NRRP – Monitoring: Concept map

(a)

Concepts: 33%. Theme size: 60%.

(b)

Theme	Hits
monitoraggio	292
sistemi	138
guida	13
orizzontali	11
sperimentazione	9
adattamento	6

(c)

> **VERIFICA DELL'ATTUAZIONE** E **MONITORAGGIO** DEL PIANO
>
> Al fine di garantire la semplificazione dei processi di gestione, controllo, monitoraggio e rendicontazione
> dei progetti finanziati, e, contestualmente, aderire ai principi di informazione, pubblicità e trasparenza
> prescritti dalla normativa europea e nazionale , il PNRR utilizzerà il sistema Informativo "**ReGiS**"
> sviluppato dal **Ministero** dell'economia e delle finanze per supportare i processi di attuazione dei
> programmi cofinanziati **dall'Unione Europea**. e dei corrispondenti strumenti della programmazione
> nazionale, assicurando la tracciabilità e trasparenza delle operazioni e l'efficiente scambio elettronico
> dei dati tra i diversi soggetti coinvolti nella **Governance** del
> **Piano.**

4.4 Reassembling words: A Qualitative Document Analysis

Once quantitatively explored the dominant contents in each policy documents in general and with reference to monitoring adopting a text mining approach – which allowed us to get a sense of the main objectives and aspects the investigated texts focus on and of how they conceptualise the key policy element of monitoring – in this section we qualitatively examine in depth the monitoring practice theoretically foreseen within a place-sensitive approach and the forms it takes in the two investigated policy applications: SNAI and NRRP.

Broadly speaking, from a place-based perspective, central government, acting as a "fair and impartial spectator" with the task of triggering endogenous change, has to "*promote spaces of public deliberation where the design of a vision, the formulation of expected results, the identification of monitorable result indicators, the construction of functional projects to achieve the expected results take shape*" (Carrosio et al., 2022, p. 7). Monitoring should thus have a central role in policies aiming at tackle socio-spatial disparities, as clearly emerges from the final key recommendation made within the recent report "How Place-Sensitive are the National Recovery and Resilience Plans?" (Carrosio et al., 2022): "*a constant, ongoing monitoring of the implications of the measures at the spatial (which areas?) and social (which groups?) levels should be foreseen, adopting a "learning by failing" approach along the implementation*" (Carrosio et al., 2022, p. 51).

Shifting the emphasis from actions and financial means to their outcome in terms of people's well-being and progress, place-based development policies "*by applying a combination of endogenous and exogenous forces and requiring an appropriate multilevel governance to deal with the development-enhancing conflict between these forces, call for a particularly important role of well-being indicators within an effective monitoring and evaluation system. They are required to provide the information on policy objectives and policy performance that can support an intense public debate*" (Methodological Note "Outcome Indicators and Targets", 2011, p. 2)[12].

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[12] See the Methodological Note "Outcome Indicators and Targets. Towards a New System of Monitoring and Evaluation in EU Cohesion Policy", June 2011, produced within the preparation of the Report "Agenda for a Reform of

4.4.1 A theoretical guidance for monitoring in place-based policies: The Barca Report

The Report proposes 10 pillars for a comprehensive reform of the governance of the Cohesion Policy. The aspect of monitoring is given much space throughout the document, and it is mainly dealt with under Pillar 4: "A strengthened governance for core priorities". As a testament of its relevance and its transversal character, some other strong implications for it can be also found in Pillar 3: "A new contractual relationship, implementation and reporting aimed at results", Pillar 6: "Promoting experimentalism and mobilising local actors" and Pillar 7: "Promoting the learning process: a move towards prospective impact evaluation".

Discussing how to strengthen the governance of core priorities in the EU Cohesion Policy (Pillar 4), the Report states that, together with a set of ex-ante conditionalities on the institutional framework, a system for assessing progress in meeting targets is to be in place in order to pursue each core priority. What is noteworthy to the purpose of this study is that, acknowledging the existence of a misconception which often mixes up "monitoring" and "evaluation" for which their boundaries and different aims are not always well-defined, the Report clearly distinguishes these two dimensions in policy-making stating that core priorities should be subject to performance monitoring – separate from evaluation – to track their progress in meeting targets. Monitoring and evaluation should not be confused. As very clearly clarified, in fact, "*outcome indicators and impact evaluation respond to two radically different tasks: the first represents a tool to focus policymaker and public attention on objectives and to monitor what happened to objective-indicators* while *interventions are being implemented; the latter represents a tool to learn about whether specific interventions have had an effect on a given dimension*." (English version, p. 180).

Furthermore, the above-mentioned "Methodological Note - Outcome Indicators and Targets" (2011) well explained how the two functions of monitoring and evaluation are linked but separate. The first function ensures that all actors know why policy is being implemented, it focuses on targets and on whether progress towards them is being made, and check whether and to what extent policy is having a role. The second function requires the measurement of the policy effects in producing them through the use of accurate methodologies.

The performance management system proposed here – using outcome indicators and targets – has a central purpose: to ensure more focus on the objectives chosen by policy-makers in their support of the core priorities. A concentration of the policy debate on targets can create a strong motivation for policy-makers (both officials and politicians) to provide a reasonable and accurate narrative on why and how targets were achieved, missed or exceeded. Conversely, an exclusive, automatic focus on one particular indicator as a measure of the "success" of an objective can have distorting effects by diverting public attention or policy action away from other relevant dimensions of the objective. The Report also tackles another relevant limitation of how monitoring was conceived until that moment: the use of target-based financial incentives, which may as well produce unintended consequences or perverse effects in the cases where outcomes are influenced by several factors largely out of policy-makers' control.

Five ways/actions are suggested to promote the verification of results of core priorities (Pillar 4):

- Creating a *high-standard system of indicators and targets* and a data-base of indicators, fully accessible by the public;
- Promoting an intensive *exchange of experience* between the Cohesion Policy community, other policy communities and the academic community on the use of financial incentives;
- Encouraging Member States (Regions) to cautiously and voluntarily adopt *systems of sanctions/rewards* linked to targets (this would include the provision of advice and technical assistance on their construction and use);

Cohesion Policy. A Place-Based Approach to Meeting European Union Challenges and Expectations" (Barca, 2009). Link: https://www.adcoesao.pt/wp-content/uploads/outcome_indicators_and_targets_en.pdf

- Promoting a *public debate* at all levels on the targets and progress (through periodic publication of baselines and target values and the progress in core indicators);
- *Evaluating the lack of performance*, in order to identify problems and find solutions in the cases when targets for the core priorities are not being met and cannot be justified on the basis of unforeseen external circumstances.

From all the above we can pinpoint the crucial elements for defining monitoring as conceived within a place-based approach: the need for a clear-cut distinction of the two actions of monitoring and evaluation as well as of outcomes/results from outputs; the important dimension of the production of a corpus of shared, widely usable knowledge, exchanging practices and scientific, evidence-based information (fostering interactions among the policy and academic communities); the cautious use of financial incentives; a guiding role of the supra-level tier of government, identified as a centre of competence (the Commission in this case – see also Pillar 8, or the State in national policies) in the definition of the targets, providing technical assistance if necessary; the promotion of a public, open, informed discussion on the achievement of policy objectives; and the identification of instances of non-achievement of targets and their possible causes. Importantly, this last element is crucial in that it implies the adoption of a learning by failing approach carried out through monitoring. Related to this, Pillar 7 puts special emphasis on the learning process throughout the whole policy cycle in which monitoring is assumed to play a decisive role.

Other key aspects of monitoring in this perspective (Pillar 6), which clearly emerged also from the content analysis, are "experimentalism" and "mutuality" among policy actors, pointing to the need to provide opportunities to experiment with different measures reciprocally check over each other's actions, thus minimizing the risk of paternalism in the selection of non-fully shared dimensions and indicators. These latter elements pertain to what is the cornerstone of a place-based approach, namely democratic participation in decision making, "*as a condition for local choices to be more informed and more in line with people's preferences and to allow citizens and collective bodies the freedom to experiment with solutions while exercising mutual monitoring*" (English version, p. 22). Monitoring is therefore interpreted as a collective, multi-level practice. In the same vein, another critical element in a place-based monitoring practice is the context-sensitiveness of the chosen instruments and measures through the promotion of community-based indicators, especially when pursuing the social inclusion objective, so as to ensure people's substantive opportunity to live according to their values and choices.

4.4.2 Policy monitoring in ordinary times: The SNAI

Once outlined the main features of monitoring practice according to a place-based perspective, we will explore to what extent and how these were embedded in a national strategy explicitly applying this policy approach. The SNAI was launched in 2014, five years after the publication of the Barca Report (2009), and among the author of this official document there was Fabrizio Barca himself, at that time Director of the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance – MEF. This National Strategies focus on inner areas, that are areas located at a considerable distance from centers providing essential services (namely education, health and transport) which since the 1950s have undergone a process of marginalisation evidenced by key signs of de-anthropisation. Around one quarter of the Italian population lives in these territories, which cover more than four thousand municipalities and sixty per cent of the whole national territory. The ultimate goal of this national strategy is to improve the wellbeing of people living in inner areas. These improvements concern different aspects, i.e. access to basic services and better use of the social and territorial capital, that should lead to an inversion of the negative demographic trend. Its aim is twofold: *i)* improving essential services and *ii)* triggering local development processes.

Looking through the official document, monitoring does not take much space in the economy of the text. However, already in the introduction, it is mentioned as one of the main novelties of this policy: "*the strategy will encompass three powerful innovations. It will initially be rolled out to a limited number of areas - one per Region. It will have a national dimension operating through two interrelated classes of actions: one*

focused on promoting development through projects funded by the various available European funds, and the other focused on ensuring adequate public provision of essential services in these areas (health, education and mobility). There will be a binding time frame, careful and open monitoring of the outcomes and comparison of the experiences and outcomes by a Project Network" (English version, p. 8). Reading this excerpt, some key characteristics of a place-sensitive approach to monitoring are manifest. First, timeliness, hence meeting deadlines should be part and parcel of the implementation of the strategy. Second, openness and public evidence of progress in the foreseen policy actions. Third, the reference is to outcomes and not to outputs, as emerged also in the text-mining analysis which finds the dominant theme "esiti" (outcomes) as the most relevant for the conceptualisation of monitoring. Fourth, the interpretation of monitoring as a collective effort based on the exchange of experiences and the formal establishment of a sort of community of practice to this purpose, that is the "Federazione di progetti per le Aree interne" (Project Network for Inner Areas). All project areas and relative agreements will be part of it. It is noteworthy that this network is intended to provide multiple services, all connected to the function under scrutiny here: ongoing (in itinere) monitoring and assessment of respect for timetables and outcomes; comparison and assistance with regard to criticalities; access to a databank of practices; shared progress on the indicator system; comparison with ordinary policy activities.

Given the intended SNAI's ultimate policy objective of ensuring citizenship right to people living in inner areas through the improvement of the quality and quantity of essential services, an essential part of monitoring activities will be devoted to the aspect of their access and level of provision, identifying different solutions and hence outcomes depending on the context and making sure that the latter are measured.

Very importantly, within SNAI it is up to the central government, although avoiding direct interference, to provide the knowledge and necessary assistance for an adequate monitoring process. The main assumption behind this approach is that local tiers of government do not always internally have the needed competence to perform it. The document, in fact, calls for a balanced position of the central government: on the one hand, it has to relinquish dirigiste approaches, on the other, to set aside any presuppositions of localist self-sufficiency. In this perspective, therefore, the center must reduce, or rather abandon altogether, the tendency toward managerial interference, and recover its strategic functions of setting goals, allocating necessary resources, and preparing monitoring and evaluation tools (Footnote 24).

Finally, it worth mentioning that, throughout the document, SNAI is said to be a multi-level "work in progress", being carried out in strict agreement with the Regions and through an effective dialogue with the Municipalities and Provinces, and within which local communities have to play a leading role in its design and implementation. This also seems to imply a collective "learning by doing", according to which the strategy will take shape step by step and thanks to the interactions of all the actors involved. However, this does not seem to be reflected in specific activities to embed learning in the implementation of the strategy.

Despite the emphasis given to it among the novelties that underly the SNAI and the explanation of its general guiding principles, monitoring remains sometimes vague within the official document of the strategy with reference to the specific tools and actions to be implemented for its operational application.

4.4.3 Policy Monitoring in emergency: The NRRP

Monitoring procedures are given a dedicated space within the official document of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan, and their description is collected in Chapter 3 ("Implementation and Monitoring"). It should be immediately noticed that monitoring is well distinguished from evaluation, which is dealt with in a separate section (Chapter 4 "Macro-economic impact evaluation").

Concerning the governance of the monitoring function, the plan foresees that each administration (central, regional or local one) in charge of the implementation of interventions will check on the regularity of procedures and expenditures and it will take all the necessary measures to prevent, correct and sanction

irregularities and undue use of resources. Within each central administration responsible for a Mission or Component of the Plan a coordinating structure is identified with the function of monitoring and verifying the implementation of the interventions that are part of the Mission/Component. This structure also provides for the reporting of Target and Milestone expenditures and progress to the Ministry of Economy and Finance. Central administrations carry out a general supervision of the actual implementation of the investment/reform they are responsible for, and they report the related expenditures as well as the targets and milestones achieved. To this end, the Plan envisages a strengthening of human capital either by hiring experienced temporary staff specifically for the structures in charge of implementing NRRP initiatives (this will be favoured by a simplification of the rules on the recruitment of personnel in the PA) or by relying on specifically selected external experts (administrations can rely on the technical and operational support of task forces activated through public companies that institutionally support the PA).

The Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) – Department of the State General Accounting Office is assigned the role of a centralized coordination for the implementation of the NRRP and of single contact point for the European Commission. More specifically, the Ministry of Economy and Finance manages the monitoring system on the implementation of the plan, "*by tracking financial implementation data and the progress of physical and procedural implementation indicators*" (p. 241, our translation). The MEF also ensures the consistency of the Target and Milestone data reported by the single administrations responsible for the measures. It carries out the evaluation of the results and impacts of the NRRP. The Ministry provides periodic reporting on the outcomes of the above verifications to the Steering Committee.

According to the document, the Steering Committee, established at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, has the task of verifying the progress in the implementation of the Plan; monitoring the effectiveness of administrative capacity-building initiatives; ensuring cooperation with the economic, social and territorial partners; interacting with the responsible administrations in the event of critical issues being encountered; proposing the activation of substitutive powers, as well as regulatory changes necessary for the more effective implementation of the Plan's measures. A constant debate is said to be ensured between the Steering Committee and the representatives designated by the administrations involved in the implementation and coordination of the plan as well as representatives of the relevant economic and social partners, but no details are supplied.

As for the tools to carry out monitoring activities, the plan provides for a special informatic system developed by the MEF – Department of State General Accounting, called ReGiS, which guarantees the simplification of the management, control, monitoring and reporting processes of the financed projects and it allows at the same time to adhere to the principles of information, publicity and transparency as prescribed by European and national legislation. The informatic system collects all financial (expenditures incurred in the implementation of measures and reforms), physical (through the collection of the appropriate indicators), and procedural data related to the execution of the NRRP. It should thus allow for the verification of the "targets and milestones", the expected results of the indicators and the implementation deadlines to which the reimbursements are subordinated. ReGiS will be accessed by the national institutions involved, by the European Commission, OLAF (European Anti-Fraud Office) and the Court of Auditors. It is not clear from the document whether citizens will have access to this same information.

The sub-section devoted to the communication on the implementation of the plan is very short and it makes explicit reference to the need of compliance to the information duties coming from the EU guidelines. As for the Plan, communication activities aimed at the involvement of all target audiences, from stakeholders to the general public, are ensured through an online portal.

Generally speaking, as for the programming document analysed, the monitoring practice within the Italian NRRP seems to be mostly conceived as a technical, report-oriented function aimed at (financially) account on the progress and on the implementation of the foreseen activities mainly towards the National Parliament and the European Commission and far less (or if not at all) towards citizens. No clear

methodological principles or standards for the selection of indicators are mentioned in the document and no detailed information on the guidelines or rationale for their ex-ante identification are provided, as well as on the actors involved in this crucial choice. Democratic instruments or public arenas for ensuring a wide, open, constant debate on the monitoring of policy outcomes or the exchange of practices are not foreseen as for the official document of the plan.

4.5 Policy Monitoring from theory to practice: A cross-document reading

In order to summarize the key features of the different monitoring practices foreseen in the three policy documents under scrutiny and more easily compare them, in Figure 7 we explore them under five dimensions which we deem as salient:

- What will be monitored? Outcome and output indicators and targets, state of implementation, results, expenditures?
- Who is in charge for monitoring within the program governance? Which tiers of government? Are new bodies specifically established to the purpose?
- What is the main aim of the monitoring activity? Is it meant for policy-learning and ongoing adaptation or for checking over expenditure commitments?
- Who are the main stakeholders of monitoring activities?
- What are the main procedures and tools to carry out monitoring activities?

It is important to stress here that the objective of this study is not to assess the efficacy of the monitoring activities put in place within the two proper policies under investigation, namely SNAI and NRPP, but to sketch their main rationale and implementation procedures in the light of the guidance provided by the Barca Report (2009) for a reform of the Cohesion Policy towards a place-based approach. It should be also acknowledged that SNAI and NRRP are very different in terms of external contingencies in which they were launched, policy goals, and especially financial capacity. However, given that they also fall into two different programming periods (2014-2020 for SNAI, 2021-2027 for NRRP) this exercise will draw the evolution of thinking about the monitoring practice. This may be very interesting if we think that already in 2009 (in the Barca Report) a call was made to thoroughly revise it, going beyond its mere function of financial reporting.

Figure 7. Monitoring across the policy documents: Comparative interpretative grid

	OF WHAT	WHO	FOR WHAT	FOR WHOM	HOW
Barca Report	*Result/outcome-oriented monitoring*	*Guiding role of the supra-level tier of government, identified as a centre of competence; mutual monitoring among all actors involved*	*To monitor changes in objective-indicators while interventions are being implemented (policy learning)*	*All-level stakeholders*	*Experimentalism; high-standard system of indicators and targets; exchange of experiences; public debate*
SNAI	*Result/outcome-oriented monitoring*	*Guiding role and assistance of the central government in the provision of monitoring tools*	*To ensure a binding time frame and an ongoing comparison of the experiences and outcomes within the Project Network*	*All-level stakeholders*	*Set of context and locally agreed outcome indicators; exchange of experiences and formal establishment of a community of practice*
NRRP	*Expenditure-oriented monitoring*	*Central government: Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) – Department of the State General Accounting Office; Steering Committee for the NRRP*	*For accountability and financial reporting purposes*	*National Parliament and European Commission*	*Set of outcome and output indicators; informatic system gathering information*

And precisely related to this, one strong difference emerges between SNAI and NRRP along the first dimension considered. Informed with a place-based approach, SNAI focuses on outcomes and on the need for an open debate on how to measure them, while within the NRRP special attention is paid to the regularity of the expenditures, as is made clear in the section dedicated to monitoring: "*Each Administration responsible for the implementation of interventions carries out controls on the regularity of procedures and expenditures and takes all necessary measures to prevent, correct and sanction irregularities and undue use of resources. They shall take all necessary steps to prevent fraud, conflicts of interest and avoid the risk of double public financing of interventions.* […] *The acts, contracts and expenditure measures adopted by the Administrations responsible for the implementation of the interventions are subject to the legality checks and administrative-accounting controls required by the applicable national legislation.*" (NRRP, pp. 239-240, our translation).

Same main function is assigned to the MEF, which is in charge of the coordination of monitoring activities: "*the Ministry of Economy manages the monitoring system on the implementation of the NRRP* […]*, tracking financial implementation data and the progress of physical and procedural implementation indicators*" (NRRP, p. 241, our translation). The Steering Committee will have instead the role of monitoring the progress in the implementation of the Plan, the effectiveness of administrative capacity building initiatives

and, importantly, of ensuring the cooperation with the economic, social and territorial partnership. As for the plan, this newly establish body will guarantee constant dialogue with the representatives designated by the Administrations involved in the implementation and coordination of the NRRP, of the relevant economic and social partners, as well as representatives designated by the Unified Conference and the State-Regions Conference will be. It is not clear whether and eventually how the active citizenship organisations will take part in it or how socio-economic partners were selected. This governance for the monitoring function also relates to who are interpreted to be its main stakeholders: the Parliament and the national institutions involved, the Court of Auditors, the European Commission, OLAF. Citizens are recipients of the communication activities on monitoring delivered through an online portal. A limitation here is that this whole procedure will unlikely allow a fruitful public debate, capable to influence decision-making and/or to ex post assess the quality of monitoring activities. As for the same dimensions 2 and 4, the SNAI foresees a guiding role and assistance of the central government in the provision of monitoring tools. Since the development strategies of the project-areas are designed at the local level, under the supervision of the central one, also the related outcome and output indicators together with targets will be jointly defined: "The inseparable interdependence of national and local perspectives follows from the fact that, each of the objectives is to be pursued through the interaction of national or nationwide interventions (e.g., national education policy; national and regional health policy) and local interventions (local development projects). These objectives will be measured by one or more "outcome indicators" the measurement of which, with predetermined time frames, will be an integral and conditional part of the programme commitments. These indicators will be associated with target values. However, the correct tie-in between the expected results of the strategy, expected results of the programs and expected results of the individual Area Projects must be achieved. It will be necessary to establish expected and monitored time frames for the actual implementation of the Area Projects. […] the three innovations (Outcomes, Actions and Timeframes) would not be effective without two other requirements: transparency and openness of the information generated by those innovations (the work of the Federation will also contribute to this); and bolstering opportunities to mobilise the interested parties and the partnership. Clearly, active local partnerships that are informed and proactive are at the heart of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI, p. 58, our translation). In principle, therefore, the stakeholders of the monitoring activities undertaken will be all levels of government involved and it will be up to the project-areas to engage the local community.

Finally, looking at the two remaining dimensions, "for what" and "how", we observe that the difference in the ultimate intended aim of monitoring within SNAI and NRPP is also reflected in the main procedure and tools foreseen to carry it out. In fact, within the former much emphasis is put on the ongoing, constant sharing of experiences, also in terms of results, among the local project-areas, in order to foster mutual monitoring and possibly learning. On top of the use of a set of both context and project-related outcome indicators, the establishment of a formal Network as a sharing platform is foreseen by the official document. Given its main financial reporting character, the main tools for performing the monitoring function within the NRRP are a database of indicators and an informatic system to collect all the information related to the implementation of the plan.

5 Conclusions and key recommendations

In 2009 a strong case was made for a reform of the Cohesion Policy and for its re-orientation towards a more place-based outcome-oriented strategy. As stated in the incipit of the Barca Report (2009, English version, p. VII), at that time there was "*a consensus that the European Union should modernise its budget, tackling the new challenges and breaking away from bureaucratic inertia and* the juste retour *logic that hitherto have prevented change*". Monitoring made no exception.

In fact, in the Methodological Note "Outcome Indicators and Targets. Towards a New System of Monitoring and Evaluation in EU Cohesion Policy" (2011, p. 1), produced within the preparation of the Barca Report, we read that the proposals made within the 5th Cohesion Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion to set within EU Cohesion Policy clear and measurable targets and outcome indicators for them to be clearly interpretable, statistically validated, truly responsive and directly linked to policy intervention, and promptly collected and publicised "*respond to the growing demand for EU Cohesion policy, as well as for all other policies financed by the EU budget, to be more result/outcome-oriented, and to counteract 'the understandable tendency of policy makers and the public alike to concentrate on highly aggregated, easily communicable measures' and on means rather than ends. The current shift of focus from actions and financial means to their outcome in terms of people's well-being and progress through appropriate indicators can contribute to policy effectiveness and to shape the agenda for budget decisions.*"

This radical shift in the understanding of how to assess whether a policy is producing the intended results relies on the growing acknowledgment that outcome results are not assured by the achievement of financial expenditure targets or physical (output) targets. They instead depend on the overall appropriateness of the intervention to the intended purpose, on the validity of the postulated causal link between action and ultimate benefit to citizens, and on the weight of contextual factors (and, hence, on the extent to which they have been taken into account by the policy). Thus, it was more and more evident that policy-makers' attention needs to be drawn to outcomes by requiring that they set goals in terms of verifiable indicators, they regularly report on progress, and they guide public debate on this information. This process is supposed to encourage public participation and to increase administrators' commitment (Barca, 2009).

Through a quantitative and in-depth qualitative analysis of the official documents of two very important, though very different, national strategies/policies which will shape the future of Italy, we investigated whether and to what extent this radical change in the conception of monitoring and assessment of the effectiveness of the interventions was embedded in policy-making.

The Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas, although with some lack of details on the operational applications of some of the interventions in that direction, has mostly incorporated the indications of the place-based approach. First of all, what is being monitored are outcomes. The governance of this key function is thought with the central government being responsible for providing the knowledge and tools for monitoring activities and the local level collecting and gathering the information, but also, very importantly, defining (and agreeing upon with the Centre) outcome indicators of the development strategy of the project-area. The sharing of experiences is key within this national strategy, with the establishment of a formal network of all project-areas to this purpose. This would possibly allow to build a common

heritage of good practices and usable knowledge to inform the ongoing implementation of SNAI itself, but also future place-based policies, ultimately producing policy learning (and especially learning by failure).

With the NRRP a step backward seems to have been made. A move back to a centralisation of monitoring activities (from the identification of output/outcome indicators to the related collection of information), its interpretation as a technical function, a renovated focus on expenditures and financial reporting as well as a limited public debate seem to point to this direction.

As claimed in Carrosio et al. (2022) discussing the experience of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans, this has to be also linked to a more general move towards centralisation experienced during the last huge pandemic crisis – hence in emergency times – and to the trade-off inherent in balancing tailored-made interventions and quick macro-spending induced by the need to speed up the European post-Covid recovery.

However, another aspect may matter in this respect: generally speaking, from no to comparatively very few financial resources are allocated to monitoring or evaluation activities within policies. In the SNAI's official document it is claimed that: "*All Area projects must provide for in-progress assessment (and therefore funding the collection of necessary information/statistics)*." (p. 58, our translation). Monitoring thus becomes an ancillary function that, apart from the mere, basic reporting requirements asked for to the institution in charge of it, is left to marginal efforts within the whole implementation of the (financed and to be budgetary-reported) activities.

Furthermore, and partly related to it, the great focus on the subject of monitoring (what should we monitor) has in a way overshadowed the issue of how to do it and, hence, the check of the quality of the monitoring process.

Much effort and scholarly and policy-making reflection (fostering a dialogue between the two) are still needed for an effective monitoring, a one that will be capable of producing policy learning and that will make policies always moving forward having learnt from and building on the past.

Given this preliminary evidence, some initial key recommendations can be sketched:

- Providing for monitoring activities throughout the whole policy cycle (from problem definition to evaluation);
- Balancing the implicit trade-offs between tailor-made interventions and spending in envisioning targeted measures, especially in emergency times;
- Adopting a "learning by failing" approach so as to embed the results of monitoring along with the implementation, hence *while* the policy/strategy is being carried-out;
- Providing for adequate financial resources specifically dedicated to monitoring activities (monitoring it is not an ancillary function, but it is a policy action *per se,* which must be discussed, defined and properly funded);
- Focusing on the quality of the monitoring process (monitoring itself should be assessed).

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