

The who, the what, and the how of social innovation in inner peripheries: A systematic literature review

Ezio Micelli^a, Elena Ostanel^a, Luca Lazzarini^{b,*}

^a Dipartimento di Culture del Progetto, Università IUAV di Venezia, Italy

^b Dipartimento di Architettura e Studi Urbani (DAStU), Politecnico di Milano, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Social innovation
Inner peripheries
Planning
Multi-level governance
Rural development

ABSTRACT

This article is a systematic literature review on social innovation in inner peripheries. It investigates what actors (who), processes (how), and topics (what) emerge from the literature on SI in marginalized rural areas. The aim is to understand under what conditions social innovation can be interpreted as a resource in inner peripheries and, at the same time, if inner peripheries offer a fertile ground for social innovation to emerge and develop. A focus on the role of planning in social innovation initiatives is also provided with the objective to recognize whether and how the literature mentions it in supporting or hindering the emergence of social innovation in inner peripheries. Results from the literature review show that social innovation in inner peripheries is frequently promoted by social enterprises and public-private partnerships that work synergically with a wide array of public and private actors, within multi-level and multi-actor governance arenas where different scales, sectors, and actors are connected and combined. The topics covered by social innovation initiatives mainly refer to rural development, with a specific emphasis on farmland and forestry management. In this strain of literature, social innovation is often viewed as a vital component of rural development policies and a means to strengthen collaboration and social learning in lagging communities. Findings suggest that social innovation can be interpreted as a resource in inner peripheries when the effort of the public sector is channeled into multi-level 'middle-ground' spaces and positively combined with the external and internal input of actors, and sources of innovation. In the conclusion, we argue the need to advance a 'context-sensitive' conceptualization of social innovation able to tackle path-dependent dynamics and address the specific problems and challenges of inner peripheries, preventing the risk that unreflexive innovative initiatives 'borrowed' from urban areas exacerbate existing socio-spatial inequalities.

1. Introduction

In the past decades, whether we like it or not, the dominant narrative has understood territorial inequalities as difficult or almost impossible to combat. While large cities and metropolitan areas were interpreted as the main engines of growth and innovation (Acs, 2002; Andersson et al., 2011; Shearmur, 2012), on the contrary, inner peripheries (IP) were seen as inexorably lagging behind and having an uncertain – or even no – future (Farole et al., 2018; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Rodríguez-Pose & Ketterer, 2019; Sandbu, 2020). Within this narrative, IP are defined as regions physically placed at a long distance from the centers of economic activity, which are denied the benefits of agglomeration, and suffer from a range of economic handicaps associated with high transport costs, access to sources of innovation, 'thin' labor market (ESPON, 2017).

Inner peripherality is thus interpreted as a multidimensional phenomenon affecting remote rural areas that sees the effects of various socio-economic dynamics that cause disconnection from more central territories. The conditions that can result in inner peripherality are depopulation and economic decline, low accessibility to centers of economic activity, poor access to services of general interest, forms of withdrawal and disconnection from the democratic processes and political centers (Proietti et al., 2022; Servillo et al., 2016).

Recent years have seen the scientific and academic debate placing considerable attention on understanding the economic, institutional, and social factors that shape territorial inequalities across Europe (Ballas et al., 2017; Charron, 2016). The underlying idea was to create a diagnosis of territorial inequalities by looking not just at the vulnerabilities of peripheral regions but also at their challenges and opportunities,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: micelli@iuav.it (E. Micelli), ostanel@iuav.it (E. Ostanel), luca.lazzarini@polimi.it (L. Lazzarini).

because «Transforming a *lonely place* in a place of opportunity can unleash the local development potential and increase the well-being of its current and future inhabitants» (Proietti et al., 2022), as the recent EU JRC Report on territorial disparities «From lonely places to places of opportunities» has explicitly underlined.

While the debate has placed considerable attention on the sources and endowments of innovation in IP from the viewpoint of economic assets and performances, less consideration was oriented to the analysis of social innovation as a means to tackle territorial peripherality (Carta et al., 2018; Jacobi et al., 2017; Lindberg, 2017; Ravazzoli et al., 2021; Tricarico, De Vidovich, & Billi, 2022). Being different from technological or economic innovation for not placing a primary focus on commercial gains but rather on the creation, renewal, or transformation of social relations to achieve societal goals and address community needs (Dax et al., 2016; Steiner et al., 2021), Social Innovation (SI) is described as a process that generates the provision of resources and services, the development of trust and empowerment within marginalized populations, and the transformation of those power relations that produce social exclusion through the creation of new actor networks, attitudes, and governance mechanisms (Moulaert et al., 2013; Vercher, 2022). According to Bock (2016), social innovation offers an interesting approach to investigate territorial marginalization as it reminds us that territorial dynamics associated with IP are part of a broader process of social change, affecting society at large, and not just marginal localities. At the same time, Banerjee et al. (2021) underline that peripheral rural regions can provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of SI – especially regarding what actor networks can promote change dynamics in rural areas (see also: Novikova, 2021) –, and of the forms of emancipation that local communities can build from the political and economic remote control (Richter & Christmann, 2021).

Nonetheless, several scholars highlighted that there is little agreement in research and policy-making on how SI can be triggered in rural peripheral regions and by whom (Neumeier, 2012; Martens et al., 2021; Novikova, de Fátima Ferreira, & Stryjakiewicz, 2020; Georgios & Barraf, 2021; Steiner et al., 2021). Others underlined the need to gather more knowledge on the study of the territorial dimension of SI and provide a critical discussion of if and how territorial configurations may be relevant for the emergence of social innovation (Tricarico, De Vidovich, & Billi, 2022; Van Dyck & Van den Broeck, 2013; Vercher, 2022). What emerges from the debate is that, being a territorial and social construct, social innovation in IP should not be merely interpreted as a form of community-based activation but it should rather be repositioned as a practice strongly depending on the institutional fabric that enables people to connect and act, as well as on the planning framework that shapes the dialectic interaction between actors and social institutions (Ostanel, 2021; Servillo & Van der Broek, 2012). While on the one hand, planning policies traditionally lag behind other policy areas in triggering and facilitating SI in IP (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020; Lazzarini, 2021), on the other the presence of a system of planning tools, schemes, and devices can be beneficial for the establishment of certain socially innovative initiatives, sustaining their capacity to generate public value and create new socio-economic opportunities for lagging and marginalized rural communities (Delladetsimas et al., 2021; Vigar et al., 2020).

Within this framework, this paper aims at improving the understanding of what actors (who) and processes (how) characterize SI in IP, and what issues and topics are addressed by SI initiatives (what). The main objective is to improve the understanding of SI dynamics in IP and discuss if SI can be interpreted as a resource in remote rural areas and, at the same time, if remote rural areas can offer a fertile ground for SI to emerge and develop. A focus on the role of planning in SI initiatives is also provided, recognizing whether and how SI literature mentions this policy field in supporting or hindering the emergence of social innovation in IP.

The methodology adopted to address this research question is the Systematic Literature Review (SLR), an approach that allows to analyze the literature in a systematic manner and provide a critical evaluation of

contributions with the results presented in a coherent and logical way.

The paper is organized into five sections. We begin (Section 2) by framing the concept of social innovation and the implications that the SI policy debate has for inner peripheral regions. We then (Section 3) present the methodological framework adopted in the research. In Section 4 we examine the key results emerging from the SLR, by focusing on what actors, processes, and themes appear more frequently in the literature on social innovation in marginalized rural contexts. Section 5 discusses two topics grounded on the key results of the SLR: the relationship between local and external inputs, and the meaning and function of the ‘meso’ spaces of governance in SI initiatives in IP. The conclusion (Section 6) underlines the theoretical nodes emerging from the literature review and underlines the need to advance a *context-sensitive* conceptualization of social innovation able to address path dependency and look at the specific territorial problems and challenges of IP.

2. Social innovation in inner peripheries

Social Innovation is one of the most quoted and studied concepts in urban studies. This does not necessarily make its scientific meaning unambiguously clear (Grimm et al., 2013; Ludvig et al., 2018). The lack of clarity of the term can be attributed not only to the evolving analytical status of SI but also to its over-simplistic use as a ‘buzzword’ in a multiplicity of policies and practices (Moulaert et al., 2013). One explanation for this lack of clarity resides in the versatility and multiple applications of SI. For instance, Marques et al. (2018) point out «a need for a clearer distinction between social innovation as a *research concept* that is used to study specific phenomena, as a *normative concept* that serves as a guide for action, and as a *concept in practice*, that it is used to describe a wide range of activities from a variety of public, private and third sector actors» (Marques et al., 2018: 497) [Italics’ emphasis added by the authors]. Several researchers highlighted the unpredictability of SI as it manifests in different spatial and temporal forms (Dobay, 2021) and presumes cyclical change dynamics and mechanisms that are not always easy to grasp (Kluvankova et al., 2021). Within this debate, it is relevant to recognize that the current increased interest in and attraction to SI partly derive from the different periods of economic crisis and the consequences of austerity politics that have pushed a number of national governments in – and beyond – the EU to promote quick-fix and low-cost solutions to social needs where civic actors have been interpreted as protagonists in finding progressive solutions for a whole range of deep-rooted problems (among the many: Ubels et al., 2019; Bragaglia, 2020). If this is what frequently happened in cities and urban areas where the abundant social and human capital allowed citizens to self-organize to answer to collective needs (Van Meerkerk et al., 2013), in IP this conceptualization of SI has clashed with the many social, institutional, and economic disadvantages characterizing lagging localities. This is the reason why in IP the policies adopting unreflexively SI have often resulted in widening existing socio-spatial inequalities and restricting the forms of citizenship (Bock, 2016). But what ideas and concepts have shaped the SI policy discourse in IP and marginalized rural contexts and what are the main emerging challenges?

One interpretation present in the SI policy discourse in IP is the idea of socio-spatial solidarity which, according to several authors, is inherently present in many SI policies implemented in marginalized rural contexts. Looking at its roots, interestingly the idea of solidarity and spatial justice is now one of the founding narratives of territorial cohesion policies. As noticed by Weckroth and Moisis (2020), while in the first programming periods (from 2000 to 2013) the idea of territorial cohesion had concerned primarily with economic growth, the following years have seen the objectives of solidarity and social inclusion becoming guiding principles of cohesion policy, with investments in regional infrastructures seen as «acts of solidarity». SI was here interpreted as a means to achieve that idea of solidarity, as «an ethical approach to social change that aims at building a community based on

values of solidarity, reciprocity, and association» (Banerjee et al., 2021: 8). Whilst this approach has shaped a number of EU policies and funding programs (e.g., Leader), actually not all scholars do agree with this approach. For instance, Bock (2016: 570) highlights that «SI is not about finding solutions for the problems in individual rural places, but rather about how to address the uneven but interrelated effects of social change». According to this viewpoint, urbanization and rural marginalization are, after all, two sides of the same coin and thus require a more integrated approach to rural development that looks not just at the redistribution of resources but also at the reconnection and at the binding together of forces across space.

Another dominant idea shaping SI policies in IP relates to the self-organizing capacity of local communities. It is relevant to notice that a part of the debate on social innovation in rural marginalized contexts is implicitly recalling the idea that rural areas alone, when endowed with the right conditions (presence of certain types of actors, local initiative, collective action, abundant human and social capital), can succeed in generating SI (Jungsberg et al., 2020; Katonáné Kovács et al., 2016; Katonáné Kovács et al., 2017; Martens et al., 2021; Novikova, Ferreiro, & Strykiewicz, 2020; Steiner et al., 2021). This idea implies a leading role played by civil society in shaping SI which, as stated later on in Section 4.2, in the literature is often attributed to the leadership of social economy entities (Ludvig et al., 2018; Vercher, 2022). The term social economy indicates a whole range of organizations, such as co-

operatives, nonprofit organizations, social enterprises, whose activity is supposed to prioritize people and communities over profit, driven by the mission to serve the common good and the general interest. As it will be demonstrated later on in the article, in IP social economy actors have a crucial role in supporting community self-organization and in shaping alternative models of provision and services, fighting the problematic consequences of state retrenchment and public-spending cuts. The social economy is seen as a community self-driven generator of potential responses to individual and place-based disadvantages and as a vehicle that facilitates the process of social innovation (Steiner et al., 2021) in marginalized places. While this strain of literature often over-estimates the real self-organizing capacities of communities, overlooking the lack of social and human capital and the institutional fragility that normally characterize lagging localities, we do agree with what was pointed out by Martinelli (2012) that, also with reference to IP, the recent success of the notion of SI and its mainstreaming in policy discourse has paradoxically ‘emptied’ it of its innovative dimension, exposing it to the concrete danger of becoming hollow rhetoric. For these reasons this article aims to improve the understanding of SI initiatives and processes in IP, looking in a critical way at the differences and similarities with the ‘urban’ interpretations of SI.

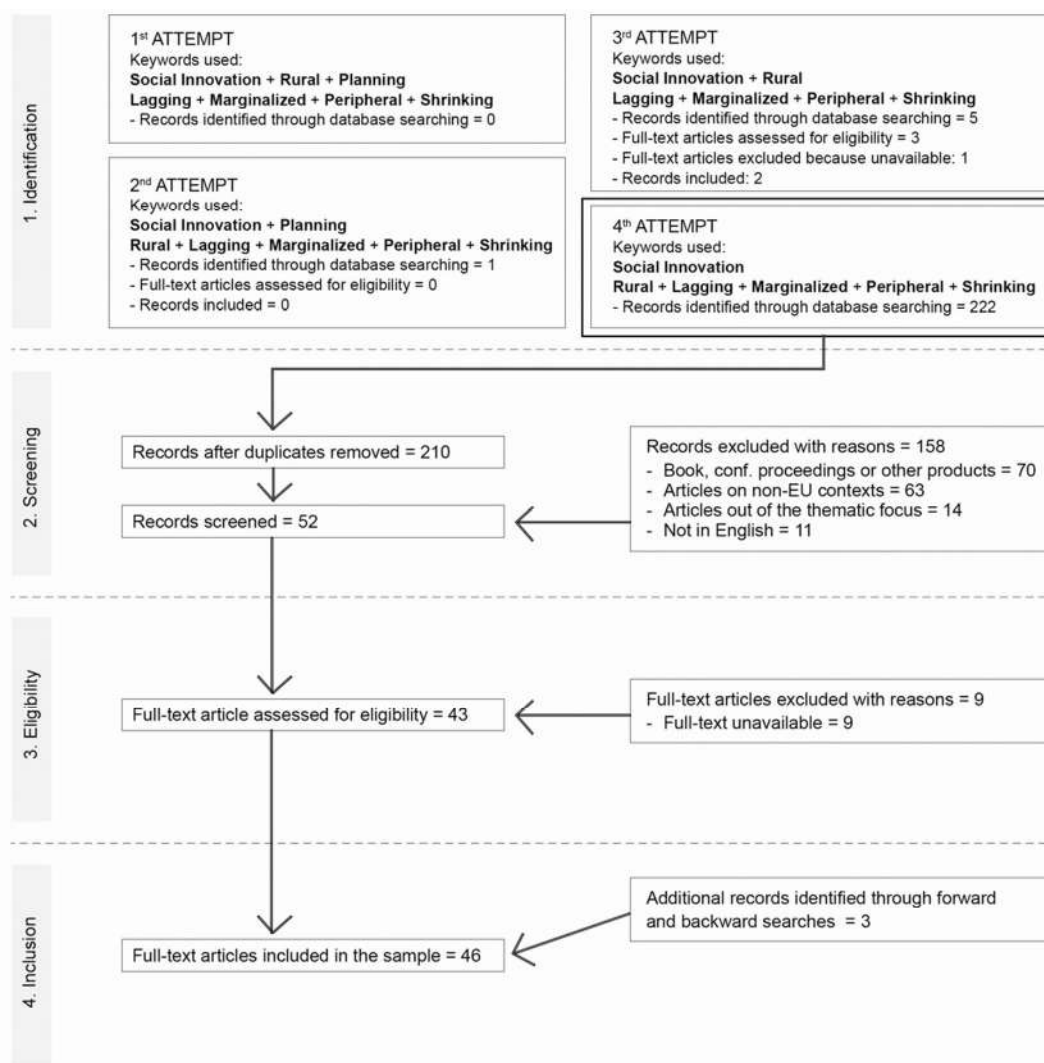


Fig. 1. Overview of the SLR operations conducted. Source: elaboration by the authors.

3. Methodology

The methodology is based on a systematic review of the literature produced in the last ten years (2012–2022) conducted on Google Scholar through an advanced keyword search. Being a ‘stand-alone testing review’ (Tricarico, De Vidovich, & Billi, 2022; Xiao & Watson, 2019), its objective is to make sense of an existing body of literature through the interpretation, explanation, and integration of existing research, which can serve as a background for future empirical studies (Micelli et al., 2023). In particular, the systematic literature review (SLR) aims to answer the following research questions:

- What actors (Who) and processes (How) characterize social innovation processes in inner peripheral areas, and what issues and topics (What) are tackled?
- What is the role of planning in shaping SI in inner peripheral areas?

The SLR has involved four steps (Fig. 1): (1) identification of the records, (2) screening of the records, (3) definition of the eligible records, (4) inclusion of the records in the review sample.

As far as the keyword selection is considered, these were derived from the research questions and based on the objective to intercept the scientific articles focusing on the actors and processes characterizing SI in IP and on the topics and issues addressed. Thus, three main keywords were identified (‘Social Innovation’, ‘Rural’, and ‘Planning’) and these were combined with other 5 keywords – ‘Lagging’, ‘Marginalized’, ‘Peripheral’, and ‘Shrinking’ – that denote specific but not overlapping characteristics of inner peripheral regions, as defined by literature (EU Commission, 2017; Proietti et al., 2022). Four different search attempts were made, placing the keywords in the two levels of the Google Scholar advanced research (first level: «with all the words included in the article titles». Second level: «with at least one keyword included in the article titles»). The 4th attempt was considered successful as it generated the highest number of records (n = 222). This employed in the first level the keyword ‘Social Innovation’ and in the second level the keywords ‘Rural’, ‘Lagging’, ‘Marginalized’, ‘Peripheral’, and ‘Shrinking’. The 222 records originated were used in the second step (screening) of the SLR. We decided to exclude from the search the keyword ‘Planning’ because the previous searches (1st and 2nd) using this keyword have not generated any records.

Three aspects distinguish the review protocol adopted in the SLR. Firstly, the choice to use Google Scholar comes from the intention to investigate the discussion on social innovation in inner peripheral areas using one of the most frequently used databases by researchers across different disciplines. Secondly, the time-frame selection (2012–2022) is based on the willingness to build the review on the recent literature and observe what directions the debate has followed in the last ten-year period. Thirdly, only scientific articles subjected to a peer-review process, the great majority of which are indexed in *Scopus*, were considered in the selection in order to maintain a certain quality standard in the sample screened. Accordingly, conference proceedings, research and policy reports, online sources, and other research outputs (commonly defined as ‘grey literature’) were not included in the sample. In addition, the review took into consideration only the articles written in English and reporting theoretical and empirical findings from researches conducted in Europe. This decision is based on our intention to focus on a specific typology of inner peripheral area – the one present in Europe – distinguished by certain aspects and dynamics (ESPON, 2017; EU Commission, 2017; Proietti et al., 2022). We are aware of the limitations that connote this approach, such as the “selection by relevance” algorithm operated by Google, or the partial and limited sample considered in the research, both of which require further in-depth investigations, also in reference to other geographical contexts.

4. Results from the SLR

The SLR brought to identify a total of 46 records, whose full-text articles were investigated according to an analytical framework that covers three dimensions (Fig. 2): the Who of SI, meaning the actors that manage and promote SI in IP, the How of SI, the governance arrangements that shape SI in IP, and the What of SI, the topics and issues addressed by SI in IP. The following sections include an analysis of the records according to the three dimensions. The first section (4.1) investigates the role of planning in SI initiatives and examines whether and how the literature mentions this policy field in supporting or hindering the emergence of SI in IP. The second section (4.2) discusses the main findings of the SLR looking at the most recurring actors and forms of governance that characterize social innovation in IP, and at the themes and issues addressed.

4.1. Planning, an unexplored subject

The first aspect of interest emerging from the SLR concerns the role of planning in the debate of SI in IP. Our aim is to understand if planning research has oriented its attention to SI in rural marginalized contexts, questioning the assumption that the debate on the planning-social innovation nexus has mostly looked at cities and urban contexts (among the many: Ostanel, 2017; Christmann et al., 2019; Nyseth & Hamdouch, 2019), overlooking rural and inner peripheral regions.

It is interesting to notice that when using the keyword ‘Planning’ in the search (1st and 2nd attempts), the SLR has not obtained any records (n = 0). Looking more in detail at the sample obtained through the 4th attempt (n = 46), we underline that 15 records do not mention at all the keyword ‘Planning’ in the whole article, while other 12 records mention ‘Planning’ just one time in the body of the article. In addition, less than half of the articles (n = 19) mention it more than one time in the text, but only 3 records report an in-depth investigation of the implications that SI has for planning policies and processes in marginalized rural contexts. These 3 records show a differentiated thematic focus on SI, interpreting it as: i) a transformative factor that can push regional planning systems to adapt and achieve socio-ecological development (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020), ii) an unexplored and overlooked dimension in regional planning and rural development strategies (Lbianca, 2016), iii) a process whose effectiveness can be strengthened in IP through the participatory planning activity (Neumeier, 2017).

More in general, the limited results show the lack of contributions that investigate the relationship between planning and SI in IP. As noticed by Hamdouch and Galvan (2019) and Sept (2020), the reasons for the strong *urban* focus of social innovation studies may depend on several aspects, two of which relate to: i) the traditional idea of innovation dating back to the 19th century as the expression of progress that mainly happened in cities, and ii) the fact that the majority of the case studies investigated in SI literature are located in urban neighborhoods characterized by socio-spatial segregation and exclusion problems, whose conditions have pushed for the reaction of local inhabitants through bottom-up practices and projects of SI. In addition, it is widely acknowledged that, being it a sector of public policies, planning usually has a more marginal role in rural contexts than in urban or metropolitan areas, due to the paucity of resources and expertise that commonly characterize small rural municipalities (among the many: Murdoch et al., 2003; Lazzarini, 2021). In many EU planning systems, the planning action is mainly exercised at the local level, and this implies municipalities playing a crucial role in constructing and implementing land-use plans and spatial strategies. Instead, in rural contexts, other policy fields, such as rural development, agricultural management and tourism promotion, occupy a more central position than planning in local decision-making arenas as they can take advantage of external knowledge and financial resources, that can also be employed in social innovation.

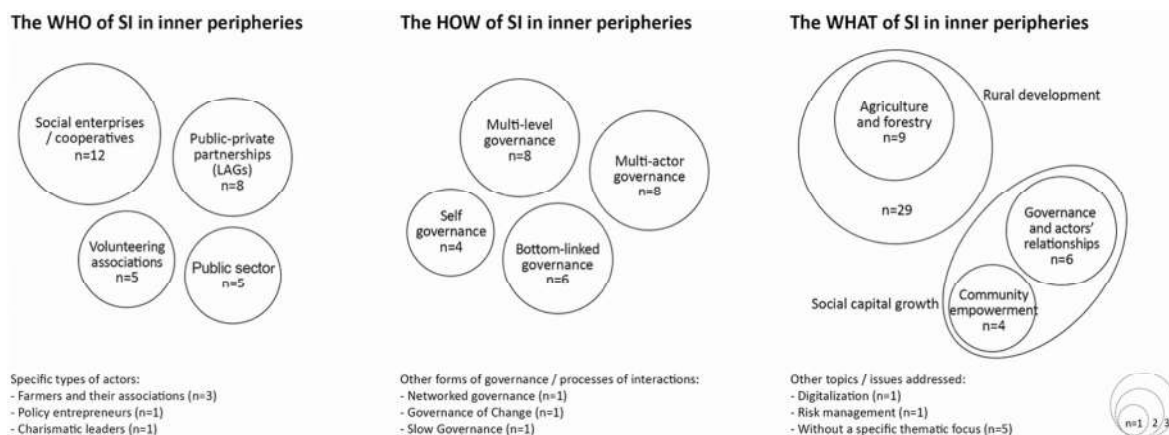


Fig. 2. Graphical representation of the results obtained from the systematic literature review. (Source: elaboration by the authors.)

4.2. The who, the how, and the what of SI in inner peripheries

As far as the Who of social innovation is considered, the majority of the articles ($n = 12$) point out the relevant role that social enterprises or cooperatives have in promoting and shaping SI in IP. Being an expression of the already-mentioned social economy model (Vercher, 2022), social enterprises or cooperatives are often interpreted as new modes of collective ownership that act as intermediaries between rural communities and key actors outside the territory. In some cases, they also play the role of service providers in social and health care (Best & Myers, 2021; Živojinovic et al., 2019) taking on the key functions that the market or the state do not fulfill anymore (Slee et al., 2022; Vercher, 2022). Another important actor mentioned in the articles ($n = 8$) is the public-private partnership. Here, the reference often goes to the activity of the Local Action Groups (LAGs) as part of the EU-funded rural development schemes like the Leader program. In this strain of literature, public-private partnerships are seen as laboratories (Stoustrup, 2022) where public and private sector actors cooperate to create knowledge and skills at the local level and put neo-endogenous development into practice (Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022).

Reflections about the role of the public sector in SI are widely present in the articles screened but just 5 records give this typology of actor a central position in the body of the article. Different are the roles it plays, according to the governmental level involved (national, regional, municipal), the resources it is able to mobilize, and the prevailing welfare regime present in the region or country. For instance, national governments can be the actor that facilitates the process, design the institutional framework, or provide the initial financial resources needed for SI projects to initiate and flourish (Ludvig et al., 2018; Vercher, 2022). A relevant role in SI is also performed by municipalities, not just at the level of facilitation but also at the one of promotion: this role is highly dependent on the inherent capacity that municipal actors have to be innovative, which in turn depends on the presence of what Lindberg et al. (2020) define as the innovation-promoting structures shaping the form of routines, processes, and interaction that characterize the public administration.

A smaller group of records ($n = 5$) mention the relevance that community and voluntary organizations have for SI processes in IP. Although in this strain of literature community organizations are rarely seen as the standalone actor shaping SI due to the centrality of multi-actor collaboration, their field of action relates to the civic self-reliance defined by non-profit and informal relationships that characterize several SI initiatives, based on the capacity of local communities to voluntarily self-organize for enhancing local livability, improve social relationships and provide innovative forms of service delivery (Ubels et al., 2019; Vercher, 2022).

As far as the How of SI in IP is considered, 8 records highlight the important role that multi-level governance arrangements have for the emergence of social innovation in rural marginalized contexts, interpreting SI as a complex cross-cutting process that connects different scales, sectors and actors' networks. 6 records place emphasis on the presence of multi-stakeholder processes where social innovation is generated by the interaction between a wide array of actors belonging to different sectors (private sector, public administration, civil society, etc.), each bringing his/her own knowledge resources and using different territorial assets. A combination of the latter two perspectives is present in a group of records ($n = 6$) that highlights the importance of establishing so-called 'bottom-linked governance' arenas, interpreted as «multi-level middle grounds where actors from various political levels, geographical scales, and sectors come together to share decision-making» (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020: 45). As highlighted by Novikova (2021), bottom-linked governance can be seen both as an outcome of social innovation and a socially innovative space of action where local community's effort toward addressing major sustainability challenges can be channeled. Finally, a last group of records ($n = 4$) is pointing attention to forms of self-governance. Here what counts is the trust in the autonomous capacity of local communities to generate empowerment and self-organize their collective action. This strain of literature highlights that the development of rural peripheral communities depends to a large extent on internal forces and dynamics and, specifically, on how these can self-organize to solve their problems and, in particular, to get out of the state of "lagging" (Dobay, 2021).

Concerning the What of SI in IP, two thematic clusters can be recognized in the literature on SI in IP, the first referring to the rural development, and the second to the social capital growth of marginalized rural contexts. The first cluster gathers the majority of records ($n = 29$). This demonstrates that in inner peripheries, differently from the urban contexts, the need for social change is perceived as most evident in the field of rural development (Bock, 2012). As Bock (2016) correctly pointed out, one reason for this focus may be that social innovation shares characteristics with earlier concepts of rural development, such as exogenous development, neo-endogenous development, and relational place-making. In this group of articles, social innovation is seen as a vital component of rural development policies, where the initial push is frequently given by EU programs like Leader that explicitly encouraged the development of socio-economic systems to meet public needs and the creation of public value where mainstream policies have failed. Farmland and forestry management, seen as specific sectors of rural development, is the central thematic focus of 9 records. In these cases, emphasis is placed on the involvement of farmers in projects and initiatives that answer to collective unmet needs via the valorization of the quality of their products, the creation of new market channels, and the

simplification of bureaucracy. Other initiatives (Ravazzoli et al., 2021) are instead oriented to involve the community in the ownership and strategic management of local woodlands, through actions oriented, for instance, to clear the dead trees and replant native coniferous tree species. The thematic cluster of social capital growth counts 10 records, articulated in two subtopics. 6 records are focusing on the process dimension of SI, with attention oriented to investigate how governance arrangements underlying SI initiatives are able to improve social cohesion in rural areas (Georgios & Barraf, 2021), as well as the ways in which constellations of actors and their relationships can promote or influence SI (Katonáné Kovács et al., 2017; Noack & Federwisch, 2019; Richter & Christmann, 2021), sometimes with specific attention to the role of public sector (Lindberg et al., 2020; Živojinovic et al., 2019). A small number of records (n = 4) is focusing on community empowerment. Here crucial aspects of social innovation are investigated with reference to community-focused initiatives that are developing new solutions or services to tackle issues of democracy and empowerment in marginalized rural communities (Lindberg, 2017; Noack & Federwisch, 2020; Steiner et al., 2021; Ubels et al., 2019).

5. Discussion

5.1. The local/external inputs and the contentious role of public sector

With respect to the analysis of the actors managing and promoting SI in IP, a relevant number of contributions is reflecting on the lack of knowledge resources needed to generate SI (Katonáné Kovács et al., 2017; Noack & Federwisch, 2019; Pue et al., 2015). It is widely acknowledged in the debate that IP generally suffer from scarce levels of human and social capital (Bock, 2016) which result in weak social networks that bind communities together (Jungsberg et al., 2020). Moreover, the intense outmigration and the brain drain of young, well-skilled residents (Sonzogno et al., 2022) worsen the conditions of socio-spatial isolation and marginality and increase depopulation and aging. For these reasons, IP usually need external actors to pool expertise and act as the 'agentic engines of social innovation' for devising a socially creative strategy. Though, Klavankova et al. (2021) pointed out that the initiators of SI do not need to be necessarily external. By investigating what actors and forms of knowledge are at the center of SI processes using a sample of 211 projects across Europe, the authors identified that in most cases the initiators were local actors (e.g., social enterprises, political leaders, farmers cooperatives, etc.), but what was external was the knowledge they were using. Also, they found out that these local actors did not act alone but were often supported by external actors and intermediaries, such as new residents, entrepreneurs, or academics, who took initiative and made decisions as part of a collective and creative action that conveyed also a process of *social learning* in the local community (Bock, 2012; Martens et al., 2021; Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022). As already mentioned, several scholars have underlined the relevant role performed by social enterprises or cooperatives, formed both by internal and external actors, in promoting and shaping SI in IP, whose importance can be explained by considering that they often take on the key functions that the market or the state do not fulfill anymore (Slee et al., 2022; Vercher, 2022). In cross-analyzing three SI initiatives in IP in Italy, Micelli et al. (2023) highlighted that SI emerged as a territorial provocation practiced by a heterogeneous coalition of actors led by a local third-sector organization that helped the local community to mobilize local latent resources and materialize a reaction to get out of the state of lagging. This is coherent with what was pointed out by Neumeier (2017) that the more promising SI processes are those initiated either by local actors (bottom-up) or by external actors stimulating a local institutional capacity to mobilize internal resources (down-up). Moreover, what counts is not only the profile of the actor itself but more importantly «the framework enabling the actors to develop social innovation processes» (Neumeier, 2017: 39. See on this also Cozzolino & Moroni, 2022). An account of the interfaces between personal abilities

(micro), social networks (meso) and structural conditions (macro perspective) of rural key actors is present in the work of Richter and Christmann (2021) who conclude that they should play the role of intermediaries between rural communities and supra-regional networks to support the emergence of SI. Other researchers made this aspect more explicit by saying that when local-level initiatives build relationships across different geographical scales and political levels, SI can scale up and work toward systemic change (Parés et al., 2017; Ostanel, 2017; Richter, 2021; Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020; Nordberg et al., 2020; Novikova, 2021; Ravazzoli et al., 2021). Facilitating access to financial resources is one of the positive effects that these supralocal actor networks can bring to IP (Novikova, de Fátima Ferreiro, & Stryjakiewicz, 2020).

In addition, a relevant number of contributions are reflecting upon the role of the public sector in SI initiatives. Around this topic, two main views are confronting in the debate. On one side, the weak role of government is seen as a barrier to the rise of SI in IP. On the other, a stronger engagement of institutions in social innovation translates into a higher risk to jeopardize the transformative potential of bottom-up and grassroots initiatives (Bock, 2012; Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020; Ludvig et al., 2018; Neumeier, 2012).

In the literature, it is well known that IP often suffer from feeble local governmental forces, scarce financial autonomy, and institutional fragility (Servillo et al., 2016), which have increased in the last decades due to the consequences of unfair and hasty devolution processes that many EU countries have experienced (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013; Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2011; Lazzarini, 2018). In many rural disadvantaged places, the diminishing public resources have facilitated the dismantling of welfare institutions, with many public services, such as post offices, health-care facilities, schools, and libraries forced to shut down. This process has not just restricted the forms of citizenship in rural areas but has also limited the opportunities for social interaction, reducing the collective efficacy of local communities and their sense of belonging (Jørgensen et al., 2020; Steiner et al., 2021; Stoustrup, 2022). Several authors pointed out that a weak government acts as a barrier to the rise of SI projects in IP. For instance, by investigating EU and national policies dealing with SI in rural areas, Ludvig et al. (2018) observed that weak state infrastructure, fragile governance structure, and a feebly imposed rule of law all influence negatively the emergence of SI. Other authors (Bock, 2012; Neumeier, 2012) stressed that the scarce institutional capacity is a crucial factor, together with a weak entrepreneurial culture, low levels of services, and limited collective actions, which hampers SI in marginalized rural contexts. Institutional weakness may also be combined with a difficult effort by local governmental actors to mobilize investments and resources for sustaining innovative processes, with the result of leaving civil society actors alone with more risks to initiating social innovation, and being more prone to failure (Asheim et al., 2016).

Another perspective is the one of the authors underlining the risk generated when institutions become promoters of SI initiatives that are disconnected from civil society. This happens, for instance, when national governments launch top-down public programs trying to stimulate the emergence of SI projects in local communities that often do not possess the resources or manifest a need to generate social innovation. This strain of literature moves from a conceptualization of SI as inherently shaped by civil society, as a form of socio-political mobilization that emerges from communities, addresses their interests and needs not taken into account by institutions (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020; Ostanel, 2017), and is oriented to contrast mainstream policy formulations and austerity politics (Neumeier, 2017; Pradel Miquel et al., 2013). Nevertheless, when governments take the role of promoters of SI programs, the risk is that SI becomes a tool complicit in neo-liberalization, which facilitates the roll-back of the state by mitigating and masking its negative impacts. This can be the case for instance when governments promote narratives of endogenous community self-help as a means for reducing public spending and transferring the provision of services to

rural people (Steiner et al., 2021). Another risk concerns the rigid organizational structures and the established ways of working that characterize them and that can act as barriers that hinder the emergence of SI (Lindberg et al., 2020). Public policies, usually characterized by a top-down logic with money spent following strict budgetary accountability, planning, and financial control, are contrary to the stimulation of SI as risk-taking initiatives. Moreover, the diverse sectoral responsibilities and the lack of horizontal coordination and policy integration that characterize many local administrations in – and not only – IP may be of damage to the inventive, creative, and vibrant stimuli that characterize SI (Dax et al., 2016).

In sum, despite the engagement of the public sector in SI is seen as a ubiquitous issue in the debate, several scholars point out that in IP institutionalization and innovation should not be considered as necessarily antagonistic (Ludvig et al., 2018; Parés et al., 2017; Sánchez-Martínez et al., 2020), and the role of the public sector depends on the scale and specific nature of each SI initiative (Vercher, 2022). On a more general view, due to problems of scarce social capital, lack of knowledge and financial resources, and uncertainty that impede the emergence of SI in IP, the public sector has a major role in supporting innovative initiatives and in creating and securing a public value (Ravazzoli et al., 2021; Vigar et al., 2020). Literature also shows that SI in IP is more likely to emerge when the effort by the public sector can be successfully combined both with the external input of capital, expertise, and sources of innovation and with local initiatives and resources. One critical aspect concerns how the local community responds to and takes advantage of external actors or resources. Much depends on the degree of openness of local governance arenas and on the ways in which key actors shape power dynamics in the locality (Kluvankova et al., 2021; Ravazzoli et al., 2021; Vercher, 2022). The risk, highlighted by some researchers (Carrosio, 2019; Proietti et al., 2022), is that local *élites* exercise a sectarian form of leadership or opportunistic behaviors to preserve their powers, keep the *status quo* according to rent-seeking/extracting dynamics (Barca et al., 2012; Russo, 2016; Slee et al., 2022), turning local deliberative spaces into close governance arenas. On the contrary, if this form of resistance to external forces is removed, localities can positively take advantage of newcomers to counteract the weak collective efficacy and mobilize the territorial capital resources needed to respond to emerging social and economic problems (Cordini, Boczy, & Cefalo, 2021).

5.2. The collaborative middle ground

Concerning the process that conveys SI in IP, though calling them in different ways, several authors pointed out the importance of establishing open, multi-actor, and multi-level governance arenas where civil society and institutional actors can gather to initiate collective learning and generate SI in regions characterized by weak social capital and scarce institutional capacity (Bock, 2012; Noack & Federwisch, 2019). The already mentioned concept of bottom-linked governance – referred to as shaping and shaped by dynamic forms of conflict and cooperation across scales – is highlighted both as «a key outcome of SI and a sine qua non for its durability» (Moulaert et al., 2019: 63). Kluvankova et al. (2021) pointed out that SI is brought forward in action arenas where different actors and networks collaborate and exchange knowledge via collective and creative learning. Institutions – both formal and informal – are seen as important players in governance arenas that can learn (Donolo, 1997) and accumulate institutional capacity as well as change the way in which policies and forms of regulation are constructed.

Among the analyzed articles, one important aspect is the capacity of these spaces to compensate for the absence of deliberative arenas of confrontation that often connote marginalized rural areas, improving the quality of local institutions (Rodríguez-Pose & Ketterer, 2019). The creation of vital deliberative and relational governance spaces may help to bridge the scarce institutional capacity, increase the low levels of collective efficacy, fight the already mentioned depraved local leaderships, leading to more legitimate and effective policy outputs (Jørgensen

et al., 2020. See on this also Van Meerkerk et al., 2013). When becoming real vehicles of learning processes, these spaces can also be means to answer to the challenges characterizing IP like public spending cuts, aging populations, and climate change as well as the already mentioned ‘roll-back’ phase of neo-liberalization in the direction to let communities be reactive and act competitively to pursue common targets and goals (Steiner et al., 2021), also in the field of territorial development (Moulaert et al., 2017; Tricarico, Jones, & Daldanise, 2022).

Novikova (2021: 73) placed emphasis on the inclusiveness of these spaces and their capacity to convey effective planning processes: «The collaborative middle ground where actors share decision-making is understood as a bottom-linked governance that aspires to become adaptive, enabling more inclusive and effective planning. Therefore, the aim of such governance should not only be to link bottom-up and top-down logic, but to create the space for collaboration essential for establishing planning policies designed to address major sustainability challenges». But these spaces to become sites of inclusive planning they also need «organizational and discursive strategies that are designed to build voice, to foster a sense of common benefit, to develop confidence among disempowered groups, and to arbitrate when disputes arise» (Sandercock, 2009: 16). In other terms, it is important that middle ground spaces become also vehicles of new narratives of emancipation for lagging communities, in order to sustain their capacity to react, organize their collective action and get out of the state of “lagging” (Micelli et al., 2023). Following these views, two relevant aspects can be highlighted.

The first aspect concerns the ‘in-betweenness’ that, according to some authors, governance arenas should have to promote SI in IP (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020; Pradel Miquel et al., 2013). In this sense, the ‘meso’ level of these ‘bottom-linked platforms’ helps to overcome the dualism between top-down and bottom-up approaches of SI toward a combination of the two, providing an intermediate space for actors from various sectors and levels to meet and implement policy objectives. By referring to the important role that bottom-linked governance arenas have in the emergence of SI, Moulaert et al. (2019: 63) pointed out the complementary or even alternative role that the intermediate spaces can have to those of bottom-up governance and criticizes the «unreflexive conviction that the political system and the state apparatus will uncritically adopt or integrate the bottom-up decision-making mechanisms which civil society groups set up». There is no doubt that one epitome of such meso platforms is the Local Action Groups, whose activity is placed between the state and the local communities and whose intent is to support and encourage innovation as a means of developing socio-economic systems and seeking to meet unmet public needs (Dax et al., 2016; Slee et al., 2022), even though the progressive bureaucratization of LEADER in recent times and the decreasing role of the groups as animators in remote rural areas have limited their presence in SI initiatives (Vercher, 2022).

The second aspect concerns the role of governance spaces as infrastructures to support what in literature is commonly defined as “rural co-production” (Farmer et al., 2012; Munoz et al., 2014). IP are frequently described as problematic areas for service delivery due to the difficult economies of scale and the already-mentioned public spending cuts of recent years. In this vein, Steiner et al. (2021) showed that a lack of relevant services in rural areas can act as a stimulus to develop new services and address local challenges through a reactive SI process within a time- and place-sensitive bottom-linked governance perspective. Co-production, intended as a mix of public service agents and citizens who contribute to the provision of public services (Pestoff, 2012), in rural areas requires not just the presence of skilled and motivated citizens, but also the existence of meaningful arrangements for their participation (Munoz et al., 2014). While in cities and urban areas co-production can use the governance arrangements and platform spaces already in place, rural areas usually lack collaborative fora in which organizing and shaping co-production. This explains the relevance of creating open spaces of confrontation that can serve as support for

conveying the transformative and adaptive capacity of communities in the service planning, provision, and implementation and, more in general, to guarantee more room for action to favor the self-adaptability of social-spatial systems (Cozzolino & Moroni, 2022).

Nevertheless, we assume that when these collaborative open devices take a physical dimension, e.g., they are hosted in community spaces whose collective identity is recognized by local inhabitants, their transformative and deliberative capacity would be significantly strengthened.

Overall, the importance of the collaborative middle ground spaces lies in their capacity to build what Hambleton (2015) and Vigar et al. (2020) defined as double-loop learning processes: those that connect learning not only to organizational strategies and capacities, but also to the normative aspects that define effective performance. This is not to suggest that such a process will be easy. Nevertheless, if the middle ground works collaboratively, there are significant possibilities that also the complex and ‘wicked’ problems that characterize IP are tackled, like those related to the form of policy and regulation. On the contrary, when they do not work collaboratively and instead replicate existing local power dynamics, the risk is that the path dependency of IP is not adequately tackled (Novikova, Ferreira, & Strykiewicz, 2020), with SI initiatives replicating existing socio-spatial inequalities, instead of contrasting them.

6. Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, we underline a knowledge gap in SI research on how social innovation is triggered in rural peripheral regions and by whom. This contribution has tried to address this gap by improving the understanding of the Who, the How, and the What of social innovation in IP, with a focus on the analysis of the role of planning. To this end, we carried out a SLR conducted on Google Scholar that took into consideration the scientific articles written in the last ten years on this topic.

Scholars dealing with SI in IP have often examined the role of social enterprises and public-private partnerships working synergically with a wide array of public and private actors, and have described SI as a process shaped by multi-level and multi-actor governance arrangements. The majority of SI initiatives in IP investigated in the records belong to the field of rural development, some of which show a specific focus on agricultural and forestry management, with the topic of community empowerment also present.

In addition, the SLR highlighted that SI literature in IP does not seem to interpret planning as a necessary driver for shaping social innovation, as other policy areas and instruments seem to have a more central role in IP’s local development trajectories, despite the beneficial role that specific land use planning schemes and systems can have for the emergence of SI and for strengthening local socio-economic settings (Delladetsimas et al., 2021). Moreover, the fact that it is mainly practiced at municipal level, planning usually has a more marginal role in rural contexts than in urban or metropolitan areas, due to the paucity of resources and expertise that commonly characterize small rural municipalities. Further analytical and empirical research is required to investigate more in-depth the planning-social innovation nexus in marginalized rural contexts.

In Sections 5.1 and 5.2 we deepened two topics emerging from the SLR. The first topic relates to the actors promoting SI in IP and specifically to the role of the public sector and the combination between internal and external actors, inputs, and resources that characterize SI initiatives. We underlined that the role of the public sector is a ubiquitous and contentious issue in the debate, with different positions confronting each other. Our assumption is that, due to problems of lack of resources and uncertainty which impede the emergence of SI in IP, the public sector has a major role in supporting SI initiatives and in creating and securing public value (Vigar et al., 2020). The analysis has also shown that SI in IP is more likely to emerge when the effort of the public

sector is successfully combined both with the external input of capital, expertise, and sources of innovation, and with local initiatives and resources. The second topic concerns the process dimension of SI and, in particular, the meaning and function of the ‘meso’ governance spaces as infrastructures that compensate for the absence of deliberative arenas of confrontation often connoting marginalized rural areas, improving the quality of local institutions and supporting rural co-production (Munoz et al., 2014). Accordingly, we believe that when the effort of the public sector is positively channeled into collaborative multi-level middle-ground spaces and combined with external and internal input of actors and resources, IP can offer a fertile ground for SI to emerge and develop.

In conclusion, we identify a couple of theoretical nodes emerging from the SLR that underline the need for further research in the direction to advance a *context-sensitive* conceptualization of SI able to address path-dependent dynamics and look at the specific problems and challenges of IP, calling for a deeper focus of the relationship between people and ‘places’, following the idea that territorial configurations and contextual conditions matter for the emergence of SI (Cordini, Lazzarini, et al., 2021; Tricarico, De Vidovich, & Billi, 2022).

The first node concerns the local government-citizens’ social and physical proximity that usually characterizes small villages in IP (Vercher, 2022) which has obvious implications for the emergence of SI. In cities and metropolitan areas, the large distance usually recognized among institutions and citizens normally acts as a stimulus of SI because groups of citizens tend to react to unmet social needs by conceiving new products, projects, or services and improving their life chances (Mangialardo & Micelli, 2021; Martinelli, 2012; Steiner et al., 2021). Differently from cities, IP normally show a specific double-edge geography. On one hand, they are characterized by remoteness, geographical deprivation, and lack of accessibility which hampers collaboration with higher-level institutions (Lindberg et al., 2020; Proietti et al., 2022), but on the other local communities can take advantage of the closeness with local administrators, which usually consists in face-to-face daily interactions and different forms of collaboration. It would not be wrong to say that close-knit ties and continuous interactions have a positive impact on the emergence of SI in IP but, as correctly highlighted by some authors (Boschma, 2005; Letaifa & Rabreau, 2013), geographical proximity should not be considered in isolation but it should rather be examined in its multidimensionality (cognitive, organizational, social, institutional, and geographic). This is the reason why it seems crucial that efforts by SI promoters are oriented to turn the already-mentioned collaborative middle-ground spaces into physical places, ensuring that the institution-community closeness can work as an opportunity for improving the local community’s collective efficacy.

The second aspect relates to the relationship between internal and external assets in SI initiatives in IP. We mentioned previously that a part of the debate on social innovation in rural marginalized contexts is implicitly recalling the idea that rural areas alone, when endowed with the right conditions, can succeed in generating SI. Our assumption is that when approaching SI in IP it is crucial to examine the kind of correlation existing between the local initiatives and resources, and the external input of capital, expertise, and sources of innovation accessed by networks stretching beyond the local community (Jungsberg et al., 2020; Katonáné Kovács et al., 2016; Navarro-Valverde et al., 2022; Novikova, 2021). Surprisingly our analysis found that just a few authors acknowledge the movement of knowledge from urban to rural settings as a relevant factor for the emergence of SI in IP. Its importance lies in the fact that external actors shaping SI in IP are often coming from cities and urban areas. In particular, Bock (2012) highlighted that SI in rural regions is shaped by the cross-border interaction of actors belonging both to the urban and rural domains and their corresponding bodies of knowledge and practices. In this vein, Noack and Federwisch (2019) underlined that SI in rural contexts is inspired by assets coming from the urban *milieu* and this has the consequence of bridging the ‘rural-urban antagonism’ toward the creation of stronger mutual relationships between the two realms.

While further investigation on such topics is required, we believe that a stronger attention to contextual and territorial factors and dynamics when designing SI policies and initiatives is a crucial precondition for their success. A conceptualization of SI that is sensitive to contextual dynamics and that rejects the one-size-fits-all policy solutions is decisive to address path dependency and contrast socio-spatial inequalities.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ezio Micelli: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision. Elena Ostanel: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision. Luca Lazzarini: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Writing—original draft, Writing—review and Editing, Visualization. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2023.104454>.

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