

Navigating Integrated Planning in Small Municipalities: Limitations, Pathways Forward Emerging Opportunities. The Case of Didymoticho

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Abstract

Over the years, the European Cohesion Policy has undergone significant transformation. The targeting mechanisms and programming strategies have been continuously adapted and redefined to respond effectively to the evolving developmental challenges of EU regions. During the 2014-2020 programming period a “place-based approach” emerged. In the current programming period the policy seems to be in its “mature” era characterized by integrated approaches and relevant financial mechanisms. We are no longer talking about regional inequalities’ recovery, emphasis is on comparative advantages of areas to boost their growth potential and build on its unique characteristics. Using the “core-periphery” approach, this paper argues that small municipalities should change their developmental trajectory with synergies and interconnection that foster collaboration rather than competition. This model may assist the disadvantaged areas to overcome structural disadvantages. Through the theoretical lens of the core-periphery model, is examined how the networking of disadvantaged areas can rescale growth potential and create multiplicative benefits. Such approaches require the empowerment of small municipalities to pursue integrated planning, find technical competence and ensure the political commitment to the partnership. Recent reforms in Greek legislation further support these efforts (such as Law 4674/2020) and provide new pathways for integrated sustainable development. Using Didymoticho as a case study, this paper builds the theoretical assumption that remote or/and disadvantaged areas can benefit from integrated development plans and collaborative structures that enable holistic interventions and improve access to funding.

Keywords: European regional policy, territorial development, disparities, growth, Integrated Territorial Investments, Municipality of Didymoticho.

OPEN ACCESS

Received: 05/01/2026,

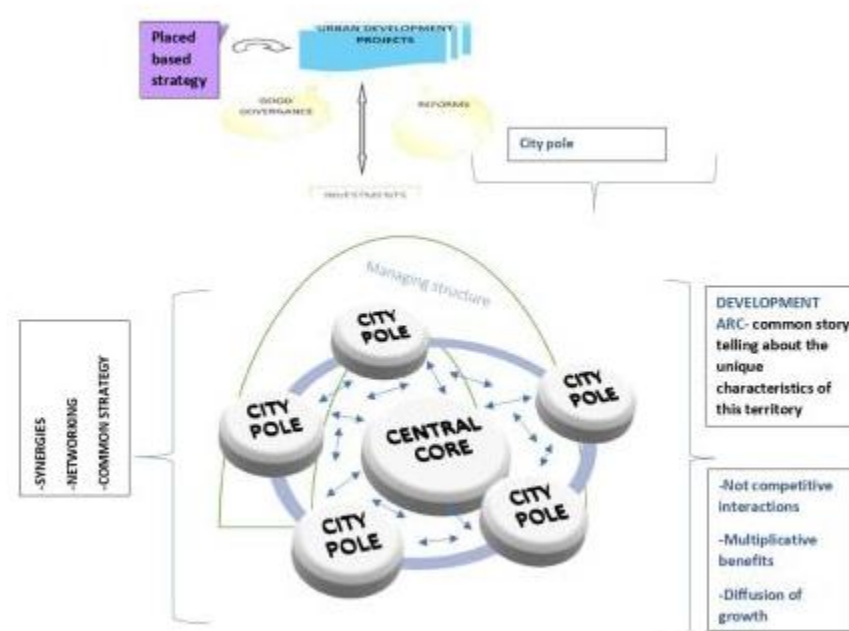
Accepted: 27/05/2026,

Available online: 07/06/2026

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Graphical abstract



1. Introduction

The fundamental values and principles of the European Cohesion Policy have been maintained and even strengthened over time: a long-term framework for programming, partnership with stakeholders and civil society, multilevel governance, evaluation and data collection, and most of all, the place-based approach – where support is tailored to regional specific needs and opportunities. The Treaty establishing the European Community sets out that Cohesion Policy aims to: ‘promote economic and social progress as well as a high level of employment, and to achieve balanced and sustainable development’ (Article 2) and ‘... reduce the disparities between the levels of development of the different regions and the backwardness of the least favored regions or islands, including rural areas’ (Article 174).

The European Union's regional policy has changed over the course of the programming periods as the needs, challenges and structures have also changed. Through the passage of time in the context of this policy, rules and directives have been developed; national legislative framework has been harmonized with the corresponding directives. Global challenges affect the European and national political agenda and new priorities have been highlighted. Development of new policies, strategies and funding targets, such the need for climate change, employment, smart and inclusive growth, social market economy and sustainable development have emerged. Territorial governance is important for the targeted and result-oriented implementation of EU Cohesion Policy, the Europe 2020 strategy, the Territorial Agenda 2020 (TA

2020) and the Urban Agenda. Structural Funds and other available EU financial tools and resources have been diffused to meet the needs and respond to the EU objectives of Cohesion Policy (European Parliament, 2015).

From the period 2007-2013 we observe that the European Union is emphasized on concepts such as sustainability, citizens’ participation, green and sustainable urban development. These concepts are reflected in Greece’s National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) for development over the years. The country’s urban policy was initially formulated with the concentration of development in two major centers of Athens and Thessaloniki and then additional developmental poles were created enhancing new dynamics and polycentricity. The integrated character of spatial strategies can involve both development poles and regional partnerships of cities intraregional or interregional.

2. Theoretical framework for core-periphery approach.

The theory of "core-periphery", proposed by Friedmann (1963), provides a framework for understanding spatial structure of economic activity in which a dominant, developed "core" is surrounded by a less developed "periphery". According to this theory, the core and periphery regions are interconnected and interdependent, and the relationship between them is not one of simple exploitation, but rather of mutual dependence. At the center of this theory is the notion that economic activity tends to be concentrated in certain regions, which serve as the engines of growth for the rest of the economy. These

core areas are characterized by high levels of productivity, innovation, and technological development, as well by a dense network of economic, social, and cultural institutions.

The periphery, on the other hand, is characterized by low levels of productivity, innovation, and technological development, and a lack of institutional development. Friedman argues that the relationship between the core and periphery regions is not static, rather than dynamic and evolving. While the “core” constantly expands its economic activity, the periphery struggle to catch up the developmental course. Over time, however, the periphery regions may begin to develop their own economic activities and institutions, and the relationship between the core and periphery regions may shift.

Initially this theory was considered to be a valuable tool to explain the disparities in European member states. The core-periphery theory is linked with urban sustainable development in several ways. First, the theory emphasizes the importance of promoting balanced regional development as a means of achieving sustainable economic growth (Davoudi, 2003). By reducing regional disparities and promoting development in peripheral regions, it is possible to achieve more sustainable economic growth and reduce the pressure on urban areas. Furthermore, the theory highlights the importance of strengthening the links between urban and rural areas (Bosworth & Venhorst, 2018). In order to promote sustainable development, it is necessary to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are shared between urban and rural areas. This can be achieved through the development of transport infrastructure and the promotion of agglomeration economies, which can help to strengthen the links between urban and rural areas and promote sustainable economic growth.

As Kühn (2015) states, Friedman argues that transportation costs create a natural barrier to the diffusion of economic activity, reinforcing the concentration of economic activity in the core regions. However, he also notes that improvements in transportation technology may help to overcome this barrier, and may lead to the diffusion of economic activity to the periphery. Another important aspect of the core-periphery theory is the role of institutions. Friedman argues that the institutions in the core areas are essential for supporting the growth and development of the economy, and that these institutions tend to be lacking in the periphery. He suggests that government policies can play a key role in supporting the development of institutions in the periphery regions, and that this can help to promote economic growth and reduce regional disparities.

The core-periphery theory proposed by Friedman can be related to the concept of regional convergence, which refers to the tendency of poorer regions to catch up richer ones in terms of economic development. In the context of regional convergence, the theory suggests that the periphery areas, which are the poorer and less developed regions, can converge towards the core regions, which are the richer and more developed regions, through a process

of diffusion of knowledge, technology, and investment (Barro *et al.*, 1991).

To conclude, the spatial inequalities resulting from core-periphery dynamics often lead to processes of peripheralization, which require targeted integrated interventions to be mitigated.

3. The European Framework for integrated planning.

By 2020 the EU aims to meet five concrete objectives – on employment, innovation, education, social inclusion, and climate/energy. Each Member State has adopted its own national targets in these areas. The Commission works with the Member States and the regions to draw up Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes outlining investment priorities and development needs. The bulk of Cohesion Policy funding is concentrated on less developed European countries and regions in order to help them to catch up and to reduce the economic, social and territorial disparities that still exist in the EU. The previous programming period 2014-2020 was strongly influenced by the objectives of Europe 2020 Strategy. During this period has been highlighted the importance of holistic approaches that include economic, social and environmental dimensions in planning and implementation of projects. Cohesion Policy initially through Interreg and Urbact programmes, through cross-border and transnational cooperation, promoted a holistic approach for implementing projects using integrated planning as a mechanism. Additionally, the logic of integrated planning is known to local stakeholders from Jessica financial instrument that had been used during 2007-2013 period and focused on the sustainable development in urban areas promoting the leverage of public and private funds and using a strategy to implement an integrated plan for the city.

As a tool for territorial policy and integrated planning, Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) was introduced in Article 36 of the Common Provision Regulation (No 1303/2013), which constitutes the legal basis for its use. The Regulation prescribes all details about how the ITI will be used and how it will correspond to the allocation of funds from each priority axis will be in the hands of the relevant Operational Programme(s). The ITI mechanism has significantly influenced local spatial planning, effectively shifting it towards more integrated, “Europeanized” approaches that foster territorial, rather than just sectoral, development. Further, in Chapter II of the Common Provision Regulation (2021) – articles 28-34 provide that the promotion of sustainable and integrated development of all territories must be delivered through territorial tools, namely Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI), Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) or ‘any other integrated territorial tool designed within a national strategy’. Overall, these instruments are intended to facilitate a bottom-up approach for a territorial development by involving local and regional governments (LRGs) (including in the initial design of programs), by facilitating dialogue between the various stakeholders and by increasing cooperation between the public and private sector, as well as by fostering cooperation and the transfer

of information between the top and bottom levels of government. “Territorial authorities” should be responsible of the territorial strategies or at least be involved in the selection of projects to be financed by these tools, in cooperation with the Managing Authority.

During the 2014–2020 period, Member States adopted ITIs and Community- Led Local Development (CLLD) in different combinations. Some countries used ITIs in both urban and non-urban territories, while others limited ITIs to urban areas or relied primarily on CLLD. The innovative financial mechanisms of Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) and the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) are available also for the Greek cities and peri-urban or rural areas. Countries decide on whether to use ITI, a multi-thematic priority axis or a dedicated Operational Program, the decision is usually taken at an early stage (i.e. Partnership Agreement negotiation or OP negotiation). In some cases, such as in Poland and the Czech Republic, the decision to use ITI was taken by the central government. In other cases, there was strong pressure from the urban level to use ITI. In Member States in which regionalized OPs are implemented, approaches often vary and the option to use ITI as an implementation tool for sustainable urban development strategies could be taken in other implementation step (European Commission, 2017).

The 2014-2020 focus was on targeted local interventions and integrated spatial development in accompanying investments for the full utilization of the development potential of the selected areas and with multiple sources of financing. The focus is not only in metropolitan and city’s level, but it shifted to places with delayed development, located outside of the urban fabric and mainly described as disadvantaged areas. Evidence from regional cases illustrates this range of interventions. In Puglia, funding supported the renewal of urban infrastructure, the refurbishment of abandoned buildings, and improvement cultural sites. These investments were complemented by strengthened public services, improving quality of life and supporting local retention and attraction of residents and businesses. In Toscana, urban regeneration in towns and smaller cities contributed to expanding green areas and cycle paths, while also improving public safety. Support was also channeled through CLLD and ITIs to strengthen resident participation and enhance coherence across interventions. This approach was accompanied by strengthening public services, thus increasing the quality of life for residents and attracting both businesses and people to move in and encouraging those already there to stay. In Středočeský, in Czech Republic, CLLD projects took place in almost 100 smaller municipalities, leading to the renewal of local roads and infrastructure, especially school buildings. At the same time, ITI projects were used to improve public transport and road connections to reduce the isolation of rural areas far from large cities.

The ninth cohesion report (European Commission, 2024) showed that the challenges for cohesion policy tend to be

more acute in rural and thinly populated regions. During the 2014-2020 programming period, cohesion policy represented almost 13% of total government investment in the EU as a whole, and 51 % in less developed Member States. Metropolitan areas, cities and their surroundings play a central role in regional development. They are centers in the provision of public and private services and employment offer and education opportunities to the surrounding areas. Better cooperation across EU regions can also contribute to achieving more balanced territorial development. Territorial imbalances could be mitigated by a more polycentric development model: building on small and medium-sized cities and enhance accessibility to public services in areas far from urban centers. Strengthening regional cooperation positively impacts the capacity of relevant authorities and stakeholders.

The 2014-2020 framework further reinforced partnerships and the involvement of regional and local actors, civil society, and social partners. It promoted territorial delivery models, such as Community-led local development (CLLD) or Integrated Territorial Interventions (ITI). With combined funding from multiple sources to serve the implementation of territorially based strategies. The approach relies on synergies, bottom-up models and flexible territorial governance structures. Moreover, the obligation was for each Member State to allocate at the very least 5 % of the European Regional Development Fund resources to integrated actions for sustainable urban development or to use them to deliver territorial development strategies in other territories such as rural or coastal regions that require an integrated approach (European Parliament, 2018). This approach enhances cities’ capability with new mechanisms and new tools to tackle the particular economic, environmental and social challenges in selected areas.

It is worth mentioning that during the period 2014-2020 a number of countries chose rather than using the multi-funding, or multi-thematic structure of an ITI, preferred to use a dedicated priority axis within a specific Operational Program (OP) to manage urban funds. In any case, ITIs tool aims to promote greater flexibility/cross-funding to promote an integrated approach to addressing issues within specific territories. tools An ITI can be a useful mechanism in designing and implementing community-led local development strategies and can be implemented by using one Fund or by using a multi-funding approach (e.g. ESF¹, EAFRD² and ERDF³). One of the challenges in this process is the engagement of the local stakeholders in designing an integrated development plan in which the city should shape its own needs and targets. This bottom-up approach should be combined with a multilevel approach and a common designed strategy that includes relevant stakeholders for the city to gain the necessary technical assistance for attracting relevant funds. Thus, the experience of the previous programming periods, emphasize the need for integrated development plans that could promote a city’s cultural and historical heritage in relation to well-designed administrative reforms and

¹ European Social Fund, (ESF)

² European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)

³ European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)

investments that boost the economic, social, environmental development of the selected area.

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR, 2022) in order to improve and facilitate the use of integrated territorial instruments in the future, recommends in its report that it is crucial to continue the use of integrated territorial tools since they are highly valued by local and regional governments. The analysis of this report, mainly concentrates on experience and lessons learnt during the 2014-2020 period, but also looks forward to what is foreseen in the new 2021-2027 period. The framework of integrated spatial investments as a mechanism does not consist of strict application rules and a structured rigid model; on the contrary, it has particular flexibility as a development mechanism. During the new programming period 2021-2027 a new objective has been included in the Cohesion Policy entitled "Europe closer to citizens by fostering the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories". The tool of Integrated Territorial Investments can be used for "sustainable urban development" and non-urban sustainable development or in both areas. The selected areas show specific geographic features, such as islands, structurally weaker regions/districts, for example "Limburg case" in France, sub-regional areas which can include a number of often smaller urban regional centers as rural territories such as the Vlaanderen case. In the majority of the cases, the tool seems to be effective enough for the transformation of the involved spatial areas. CLLD is not part of our analysis as we conclude that it is based in different mechanisms and legal framework than it is and this is not part of the current paper.

The previous implementation in several countries such as Czech Republic, Germany, Austria, Bulgaria and others showed that ITI and CLLD tools allow EU support to focus on the real needs of the local communities, while they seem to be more flexible compared to broader operational programs and contribute to better multi-level governance structures. The development of strategies, plans, projects in close cooperation with the real beneficiaries with the engagement of multi-level stakeholders and the combination of multiple funds will be the challenge for local authorities during the new programming period of Cohesion Policy 2021-2027.

The "Ex post evaluation of Urban Development and Social Infrastructures" (European Commission, 2016), showed that the amount of ERDF funding allocated to selected projects of urban development and social infrastructure at the end of 2013 was EUR 29 billion. This represents 11% of the total ERDF allocation of which 4% was allocated to urban development and 7% to social infrastructure. Also, is referred in the evaluation that only a low percentage of OPs around European states place integrated development into a specific context, such as the need for revitalizing urban neighborhoods and industrial areas, build on cultural heritage or enhance local level partnerships. Therefore, integrated approaches should not be treated as panacea but they should be pursued where the nature of the problems calls upon them and the appropriate conditions

exist. For integrated urban development, there is an inevitable tension between the level of programming and the integrated local strategies: if programming is done at the national or regional level, it is more difficult to reflect adequately the specific local-level problems as the program is most likely covering a larger number of local strategies. This is obviously true for national programs – which tend to have a sectoral focus. On the other hand, regional programs: needs to cover several local territories and strategies thus regional strategy takes into account the local strategies and tend to be rather general.

The theory and the European strategies provide useful tools to assist a local authority to build a holistic plan for its development. The Integrated Territorial Investment tools are not a one-size-fits-all solution for development, but a choice. Territorial governance is important for the targeted and result-oriented implementation of EU Cohesion Policy, the Europe 2020 strategy, the Territorial Agenda 2020 (TA 2020) and the Urban Agenda. At the European level there are guidelines for integrated planning. Each place has its own characteristics and identity that can be used as development assets and incorporated in its development strategy. Local-placed approaches should leverage the relevant funds at the regional level and "integrate" the relevant stakeholders from the initial phase promoting a sustainable structure passing through the implementation phase.

4. Research Area: The Case of Didymoticho

Our case study refers to the city of Didymoticho. The Municipality of Didymoticho is a newly established municipality of the Region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace pursuant to Law 3852/2010 "New Architecture of Self-Government and Decentralized Administration - Kallikratis Project". It resulted from the amalgamation of the pre-existing Municipalities of Didymoticho and Metaxades and includes the homonymous settlements and municipal communities of Didymoticho Ellinochori and the local communities of Asvestades, Asimeniou, Isa Kiikiou, Karotis, Koufobounou, Kyani, Mani, Petrofikou, Petrofados, Alepochori, Asproneri, Vrysiki, Doxis, Elafochori, Ladi, Metaxadon, Paliouri.

As far as its geographic location, the Municipality of Didymoticho is located in the North-Eastern part of the Evros Regional Unit and is situated at a close distance from the Greek-Turkish border and is about 40 km from the Bulgarian borders. The area of the new Municipality is 565,4 sq.km. and its permanent population according to the 2021 National Statistical Service census same 16,060 inhabitants, while its actual population is 16,019 inhabitants. Didymoticho was designated as the seat of the new Municipality.

Didymoticho (Greek: Διδυμότειχο) is a town located on the eastern edge of the Evros regional Unit of East Macedonia and Thrace, in northeastern Greece. It is the seat of the municipality of the same name. Based on historical sources "Didymoticho" means the two opposite fortified cities, "castle didymariko". The two twin hills control the road that connected Traianoupolis and Adrianople. The

fortification is kept in good condition without any particular problems.

The Municipality of Didymoticho is mainly a rural area, where primary sector is the main economic activity. Much of the area is used for farming. The main residential nucleus in the city of Didymoticho and the center of commercial activity is the old historical settlement. The built-up area developed mainly to the east and south of the historical settlement. In the settlement of Didymoticho where the highest density of urban fabric is found, free spaces and greenery within the historical settlement are limited, but the proximity of the large archaeological site of Kale Castle partially compensates the impression of this lack.

Despite its strategic location and cultural resources, the municipality faces structural developmental challenges. The municipality faces significant deficits in water supply and drainage infrastructure. The municipality faces limitations in transport connectivity and the lack of broader infrastructures and services constrain its accessibility and its economic activity.

The Municipality of Didymoticho has been significantly affected by the economic and social crisis, which has intensified long-standing structural problems. These include demographic decline, population ageing, internal migration, unemployment, relatively low educational attainment, and low household incomes.

On the other hand, several Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman monuments are dispersed in the city and its surroundings; this reflects the area's long historical trajectory. The notion that characterized the city was "multiculturalism", which continues to be expressed through the built environment and heritage sites located within its administrative boundaries. These cultural and historical assets represent an important development resource; thus, an integrated and place-based strategy should be considered. Alternative tourism approaches such as cultural or nature tourism may present a potential pathway for diversification and local regeneration.

However, the effectiveness of tourism strategies depends on a range of internal and external factors, including local stakeholder commitment, the wider regional and national economic context, and technical and administrative capacity to design and implement coherent interventions. By understanding these factors is identified both the constraints and the realistic prospects for strengthening the municipality's tourism product and supporting local entrepreneurship and economy.

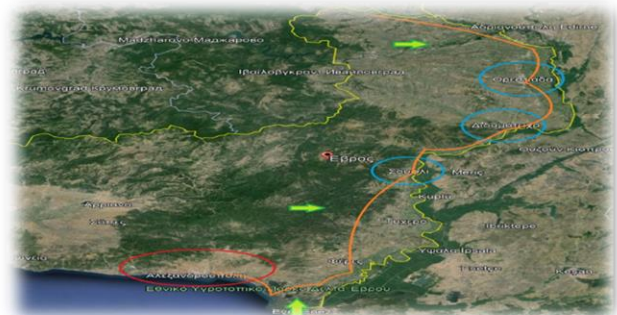
The Municipality of Didymoticho could benefit from an integrated territorial approach and a partnership-based model that seems more resilient and feasible than isolated project-based interventions. Building on these assumptions, this paper examines whether a realistic scenario can be developed to reverse the current decline trajectory and support a more sustainable development pathway for Didymoticho. The analysis emphasizes that long-term regeneration requires synergies at a wider territorial scale, including cooperation with a major core beyond a cluster of poles based on the local unique

characteristics and common territorial advantages that ensure resilience and long-term feasibility. The following section develops this argument further and links it to empirical findings and policy instruments available in the Greek and European context.

5. Key findings: Integrated planning in the case of Didymoticho

Based on the "core periphery" economic theory, this paper assumes that the central pole attracts all the development aspects such as infrastructure, public services, transport connections and pushes the peripheral cores to use their unique characteristics and advantages, connecting natural and cultural resources, building a common identity within a partnership. The cores and central pole are not competitive, but are supplements in the development arch. Each territory contributes with its distinct comparative advantages and benefits from stronger functional integration.

In this case, the core-Alexandroupoli provides critical infrastructure and services, while peripheral poles (E.G. Soufli, Didymoticho and Orestiada) can mobilize their unique cultural, natural and historical assets in this developmental arch.



The creation of a shared territorial identity within the partnership, a common strategy and vision may support integrated planning and access to funding. The advantages of this approach refer to the empowerment of small municipalities to follow integrated planning, find technical competence, political commitment to the partnership, and ability to implement projects on time. This approach creates added value to the participating institutions and multiplier effects for the involved territories. When municipalities operate as part of the functional territorial network, they can jointly articulate development priorities, bundle complementary assets and increase scale and coherence of proposed interventions. This approach support municipalities to:

- 1) gain access to multi-source funding mechanisms
- 2) gain administrative and technical capacity
- 3) unlock development potential
- 4) change the quality of life for their citizens and service provision

When non-urban territorial units operate as part of a functional territorial network similar to the urban functional area, they can jointly articulate development priorities and increase the scale and coherence of proposed interventions. Joined strategies can unlock

comparative advantages of local economies, support equitable distributions of services and improve long-term attractiveness in the territorial “cluster”. By pooling resources and administrative capacity such forms of cooperation can generate shared benefits across municipal boundaries and contribute to a more resilient and balanced territorial structure.

In general, the ability of local authorities to design and implement integrated strategies is questioned. The challenge is not primarily located in urban centers. The limitations are more pronounced in smaller municipalities, non-urban and disadvantaged areas, where developmental needs are often greater but administrative and technical capacity is limited. The administrative burden of designing and integrated strategy, ensuring stakeholders participation and coordinating implementation across multiple interventions often exceeds the capacity of a sole municipality.

Reforms in the Greek legislative framework increasingly support inter-municipal cooperation and integrated planning. The Law N. 4674/2020 as published in the Official Gazette A 53 - 11.03.2020, provides an institutional basis for strengthening local implementation capacity and operate as complementary support bodies for municipalities where technical capacity is limited. Moreover, among other responsibilities these institutions may undertake the implementation of Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) in spatial strategies, subject to the relevant governance protocols and the Management and Control System of National Strategic Reference Framework for development (NSRF).

Local government organizations can participate in any joint stock company for local development. Based on the presidential decree 410/95, the local government development organizations operate as a complementary support body to the local government organizations in a multitude of issues. The development organizations provide scientific and technical support, participate in the development policy of local authorities, they also have a significant contribution to the maturation of studies and projects, but also to the implementation of actions of social cohesion, digital convergence, energy upgrading and sustainable development. The jointed entities provide a flexible framework and more integrated governance architecture (Florris & Serra 2025). Their capacity and expertise may be crucial to drive integrated planning processes, allocation of roles and management of regional economic resources. Additionally, their role is crucial in the defining of goals and indicators, and the monitoring of them for effective implementation of common strategies that build the network.

The experience shows that the integrated planning is hard to be exercised by an isolated small municipality. Its capacity remains constrained by understaffing and lack of technical services to act as a stand-alone implementation body. The proposed model of synergies allows a shared pool of resources and expertise. Coordination should be managed by a capable entity—beyond the regional authority—serving as a facilitator with specialized staff.

The regional authority in the network can provide strategic alignment and ensure coherence with regional planning framework. The regional planning together with local planning enable integrated formations at the intra-regional level. This model is in line to EU prerequisites for financing an Integrated Territorial Investment in non-urban environment.

During the programming period 2014-2020, the European as well as the national practice showed that the tool of Integrated Territorial Investments was successfully implemented or at least it achieved the purpose of its design. Most integrated Territorial Investment mechanisms in the Greece have transferred their implementation to the current programming period 2021-2027. We are keeping a watchful eye on the results “taking a wait-and-see approach” despite the encouraging implementation during the pilot application of the tool.

6. Conclusions

This paper concludes that spatial inequalities are approached through a new “re-balancing” framework. The European Cohesion Policy has successfully transitioned towards to place-based, bottom-up and holistic approaches. Obviously, the interest of rural areas arise during the last few programming periods and as stated in Territorial Agenda 2030 links and flows between places, especially along corridors, affect the possibilities to realize potential or respond to challenges. The EU supports local authorities to strengthen cooperation on long-term place-based strategies and address sustainable functional links between neighboring areas.

Now than ever the smaller administrative units have available tools, mechanisms and legislative framework to build synergies for achieving sustainable development in their territories building in their unique characteristics and strengths. Territorial strategies must redefine visions of places with clear objectives, funding sources and measurable indicators.

As McCann (2021) 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”. Modern place-based approaches aim to operate at the level of functional economic areas – which may involve different jurisdictional units working together – and to foster integrated development projects in which resources are targeted at a range of actors across different sectors, in order to construct a more realistic development plan. The development of the territorial pattern of the region inevitably leads to the creation of poles of different dynamics and roles. Each unit should accept its role in this cluster spreading the benefits for the entire region within a multipolar system that has been formed and work towards the development course and strategy of the overall structure. Networking across functionally defined polycentric territorial contexts enables diverse actors to collective capacities, know-how and expertise.

Speaking of Greek cities, these cities are not inferiors to their European counterparts. Cities despite their size are considered to be complex systems that develop under complicated interactions among their human and environmental components. As such, they require multidimensional, integrated and holistic interventions, which could be seen within an integrated development plan despite the size of the city and its capacity. The integrated approach underlines the need for improved coordination between the spatial, sectoral and temporal aspects of territorial development policies and putting local authorities at the centre of the governance. The active engagement of the relevant stakeholders will make this process more realistic and sustainable while specific focus should be taken regarding the capacity and the expertise of the coordinating authority.

Overall, the findings of the current paper support the view that integrated territorial approaches may provide a viable pathway for small non-urban municipalities to strengthen their development capacity, to unlock growth potential, and to apply flexible governance structure and targeted legislative framework. Ultimately, EU and national policies recognize and invest in intermediate governance structures as critical drivers of territorial cohesion, enabling inner peripheries to shift from marginalization to active participation in shaping their spatial futures. The choice is up to the local authorities whether they choose a new direction or continue on the same path as they did in previous years.

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