

# Integrated Services, Small Municipalities and Quality of Life: an Institutional Perspective

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## Abstract

This work highlights how the experience gained in the joint management of functions and services by small municipalities, can propose small municipalities as the entities to focus on in the future for a better quality of life, thanks also to flexibility and adaptability allowed by standards and - above all - by technology. Technological investments, in fact, allow small municipalities to offer additional, diversified, and at lower costs services aimed at decongesting cities and influencing some value dimensions of common life that have been forgotten for a long time.

## Overview

The recent pandemic has led to the rediscovery of a society focused on different spaces and to re-evaluate the potential of neglected territories. All this has shown how a more balanced urban planning model and the use of technologies allows you to live where you want, with a high quality of life.

Small realities allow a better quality of life with respect to medium/large cities (Figure 1); this thesis is supported by the collecting data which demonstrate the real reasons which can be summarized as follows:

- less-stress and healthy lifestyle
- better interpersonal relationships
- better quality of the environment
- best available spaces
- better traffic and circulation conditions
- better general conditions in terms of public order and security

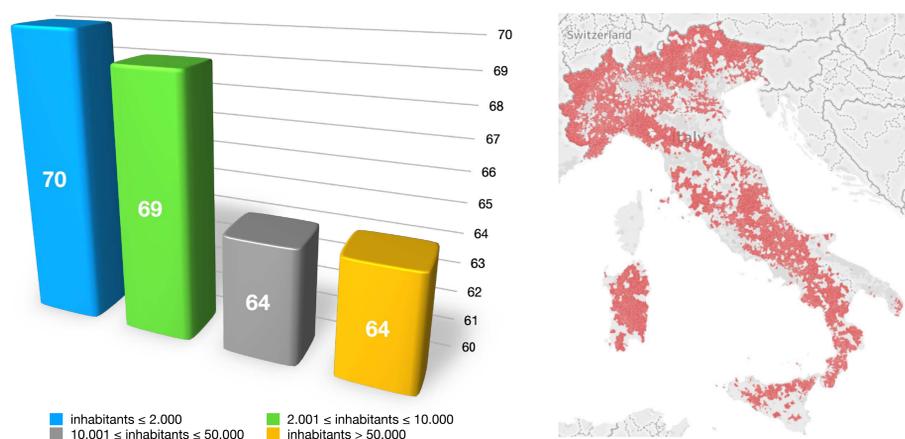


Figure 1 – On the left: people who vote 7/10 (or more) to the question “satisfaction about the quality of life” (source: “Aspetti della vita quotidiana”, ISTAT, 2017); on the right: distribution of the Italian small municipalities (source: ANCI, 2019)

## The challenge of the small municipalities for a higher quality of life

Small municipalities in Italy, namely those with a registered legal population of fewer than 5.000 inhabitants, are 69.5% of the 7.918 existing Italian municipalities (Figure 1). About 17% (more than 10.000.000) of the Italian population lives there. These small centers, at risk of emptying, have been defined as “internal areas” at an institutional level, and they are considered an important source to improve the quality of life of people, and a treasure of opportunities for overall Italy: they defend the territory from hydrogeological risk, they have precious resources such as water and forests, and an extraordinary naturalistic, agricultural and cultural heritage. On the other hand, however, the lack of different services such as schools, public transport, sustainable health, employment, infrastructure, and broadband (Figure 2) weighs heavily; this is also due to the cuts in public spending, which affects these realities for several years.

All this demands new integrated services and technologies. It is time to encourage the institutional innovation of the local authorities, which should focus on technological investments in the area to enhance social, cultural, and health services, from a perspective of improvement of the quality of life.

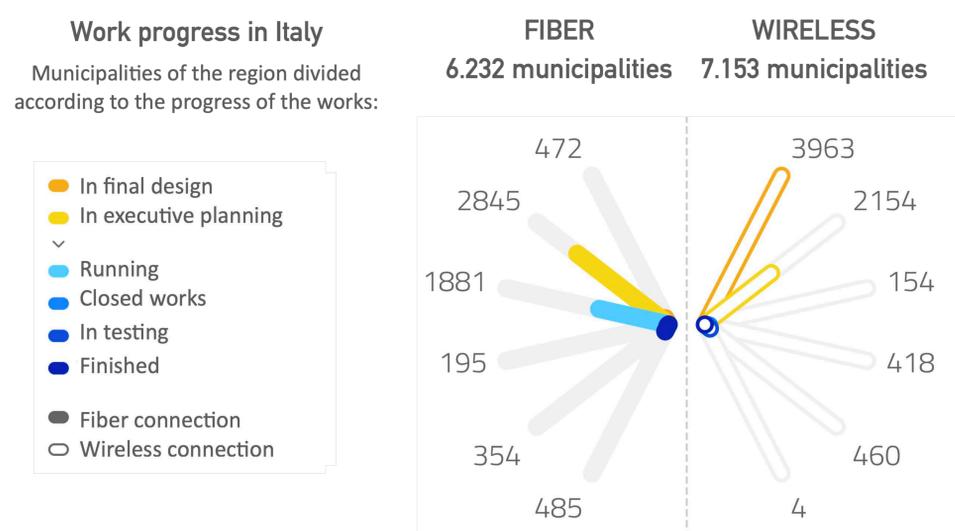


Figure 2 - Current state of broadband installation in the Italian municipalities (source: “Ultra-broadband strategic plan”, Ministry of Economic Development, 2020)

## The institutional perspective

From the institutional point of view, one solution to the highlighted problems of the small municipalities is given by law no. 142/1990, which introduced the “union of municipalities” as an alternative and concrete tool for the development of integrated service networks and for the implementation of both political-administrative and technological tools aimed at improving the quality of life of citizens. The potential of these aggregative and integration administrative models can find one concrete expression with law no. 158/2017. This law provides measures and tools to strengthen local services - starting from digital and healthcare facilities such as the Covid-19 emergency highlighted - and to promote, in particular, artisanal, food and wine production, and the recovery, requalification of the historical centers. This allows the small municipalities to experiment with widespread and shared policies, and thus to increase the competitiveness of the territory and create an attractive economic and social context, in which citizens, businesses, and administrations can live, work, and interact.

To be effective, any institutional and administrative solution must be importantly supported by technology. Small municipalities need technology to continue to grow and the current situation in which we find ourselves, which forces us to intensify the smart working, demonstrates this. It is the Italy of small municipalities, often not considered by large operators in the telecommunication sector (Figure 2), which are clamoring for infrastructures (fiber optics broadband connection) and technological means to keep pace with large urban agglomerations. In this context, the AAL technologies allow people of any age to live in small realities, thus having all the benefits of the suburbs and, at the same time, the advantages that smart living technology today provides in the so-called urban areas.

## Conclusions

Technological, digital infrastructures are needed for small municipalities and individuals to be and remain connected but, at the same time, an important rethinking is needed about the location of some public and collective functions that continue to be assigned according to traditional schemes, largely obsolete. It is about investing to save for the long term; this means to have the foresight not only for the conservation of local territories but also to improve the quality of life.