

Quality of Life in Basilicata's Inner Areas (Italy): A Q-Methodology pilot study on Mayors' perceptions for local development

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Quality of Life in Basilicata's Inner Areas (Italy): A Q-Methodology pilot study on Mayors' perceptions for local development.

This study examines how mayors in Basilicata's inner areas perceive factors shaping quality of life and local development. Using an exploratory pilot design combining the Capabilities Approach and Q methodology, it investigates the priorities and meanings local decision-makers assign to territorial well-being. Thirty-one mayors from peripheral and ultra-peripheral municipalities ranked 24 statements on quality of life. Factor analysis identified five viewpoints, emphasizing institutional and bureaucratic barriers, community resilience and social ties, inter-municipal cooperation, strategic planning, and essential services. Findings portray inner areas as complex systems where structural vulnerabilities coexist with social and territorial resources. The study highlights the territorial nature of capabilities and supports place-based policies aimed at strengthening services locally and cooperation, simplifying administrative processes, and expanding opportunities for younger generations.

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, Quality of Life has emerged as one of the most relevant paradigms for interpreting socio-economic and local development, moving beyond traditional measures based on income and economic growth (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Quality of Life is now recognised as a multidimensional and dynamic construct, resulting from the interaction between objective dimensions – such as health, access to services, environmental and infrastructural conditions – and subjective dimensions, such as personal satisfaction, sense of community, trust and perceived freedom (Beltramo et al., 2024; World Health Organization, 1995). This perspective fits into a broader framework of global policies geared towards sustainability and regional cohesion (Sachs et al., 2019; United Nations, 2022), which invite us to consider well-being not simply as an economic outcome, but as a balance between individual opportunities and local conditions.

This approach assumes particular relevance in rural contexts and, even more specifically, in Italy's inner areas, which constitute a crucial testing ground for cohesion and sustainable development policies. These territories are commonly marked by remoteness from essential services, demographic decline, ageing populations, and infrastructural fragilities, all of which contribute to persistent socio-economic vulnerability and directly shape local quality of life (Barca and Terribile, 2019; Agency for the Territorial Cohesion, 2024). At the same time, inner areas often preserve forms of social cohesion, local identity, and territorial capital that may represent important resources for development (Barca and Terribile, 2019; Basile, 2020). In Basilicata, where inner areas largely overlap with rural and mountainous territories, these dynamics are particularly pronounced (Basile, 2020; D'Oronzio et al., 2018).

Within this framework, Basilicata, an entirely inner and predominantly mountainous region located in southern Italy, represents an emblematic case (Andreoli et al., 2026; Viccaro et al., 2021). It covers an area of approximately 10,000 km², similar in size to, for example, Cyprus, Jamaica or New York city, and has approximately half a million inhabitants, corresponding to a population density of about 55 inhabitants per km², one of the lowest in the country (ISTAT, 2024). The region is divided into two provinces, Potenza and Matera, both characterized by highly dispersed settlement patterns and a network of small rural municipalities; 45% of these municipalities are classified as peripheral or ultra-peripheral (Agency for the Territorial Cohesion, 2024); that is, distant from the main centres providing essential services such as healthcare, education, and mobility. The perceived quality of life in these territories is strongly influenced by these very factors: distance from service hubs, limited infrastructural accessibility, and the strength of social networks (Andreoli et al., 2026; Viccaro et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, Basilicata retains significant endogenous cultural, landscape, and agri-food resources that contribute to a latent resilience and provide a foundation for development strategies grounded in local identity and the sustainable use of local resources (Moliterni et al., 2025).

In this context, analysing the perspectives of local decision-makers on what is important for quality of life in their area assumes crucial importance. Municipal administrations, particularly mayors, constitute institutional actors who experience daily the dual role of policy implementers and interpreters of local communities. Their perspective represents a "*privileged point of view*" on the tension between structural constraints and local agency: on the one hand, they translate collective needs into policy choices; on the other, they directly experience the effects of those choices in terms of service provision, participation, and social cohesion. As Lucatelli and Monaco (2018) showed, mayors of such inner areas often act as development mediators between national policies and local community life, and thus capable of offering a synthetic and reflective perspective on local quality of life. Studying their perceptions, therefore, makes it possible to grasp the institutionalized dimension of perceived well-being, that is, the way in which quality of life is defined, negotiated, and translated into operational strategies *within and for* the territory.

Building on this perspective, the present study aims to analyse the perceptions and priorities attributed to the different dimensions of quality of life by mayors of municipalities located in the inner areas of Basilicata. The general objective is to employ Q methodology to identify the viewpoints of local mayors on what is important for well-being¹ in their area, interpreted through the lens of the Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). In doing so, this study seeks to understand how mayors' viewpoints reflect the substantive freedoms (capabilities) and structural constraints (unfreedoms) that characterize rural and marginal contexts. To achieve this general aim, the study pursues a specific objective: to understand mayors' subjective viewpoints on what constitutes quality of life in order to inform place-based policies focused on the dimensions of well-being that are most relevant to local stakeholders.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the conceptual and theoretical framework, focusing on Quality of Life in inner areas and on the integration between the Capabilities Approach and Q methodology. Section 3 presents the research design, including the development of the statement set, the data collection process, and the analytical procedure. Section 4 reports the main results through the identification and interpretation of the different viewpoints expressed by mayors. Section 5 discusses the findings by highlighting their theoretical implications, the main limitations and future research directions, and the related policy implications. Finally, Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This study adopts an exploratory pilot research design (Aschbrenner et al., 2022; Hallingberg et al., 2018; Malmqvist, 2019) and follows in the footsteps of studies that, in recent years, have proposed an integrated approach to measuring well-being, combining objective data and subjective perceptions (Cannings et al., 2024; Loveridge et al., 2020; Voukelatou, 2021). This reflects the growing attention to the experiential and contextual dimensions of quality of life, particularly in rural areas, where well-being experiences cannot be fully understood through economic or structural indicators alone (Beltramo et al., 2024; Weckroth et al., 2022). For this reason, this study integrates two complementary

¹ In this article, the term 'well-being' is used as a synonym for 'quality of life' because it refers to the concept of living well in a comprehensive sense, i.e. living conditions (Bautista et al., 2023; Pinto et al., 2017).

theoretical and methodological frameworks: the Capabilities Approach (Section 2.1) as theoretical foundation and Q methodology as empirical approach (Section 2.2).

2.1 Theoretical framework: Capabilities Approach

The Capabilities Approach, introduced by Amartya Sen (1999) and later expanded by, among others, Martha Nussbaum (2011) conceptualizes well-being as people's *substantive freedoms* to choose and pursue the kind of life they have reason to value, rather than the possession of resources or the satisfaction of preferences. From this perspective, quality of life depends on the set of *capabilities*, understood as the real opportunities to “be” and “do” that individuals and communities can effectively exercise within specific social, institutional, and environmental contexts. Nussbaum (2011) identifies ten *Central Capabilities*, including bodily health, bodily integrity, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, play, relations with other species, and control over one's political and material environment. These capabilities are not merely individual attributes but are also deeply influenced by territorial context, such as infrastructure, social networks, local governance, and access to services.

In regions such as Basilicata, the ability to transform resources into effective freedoms is strongly conditioned by external structural constraints (Mantino, 2022; Robeyns, 2011). From this perspective, local deficiencies do not merely represent economic deficits but genuine constraints on freedom that hinder people's ability to choose, participate, and design a shared local future (Sen, 1999). This analytical framework, offered by the Capabilities Approach, provides the theoretical basis for interpreting the priorities expressed by mayors in this study, as indicators of perceived freedoms or constraints.

2.2 Methodology: Q methodology

To systematically investigate subjective perceptions, understood as the way in which social or institutional actors construct coherent meanings around complex concepts such as well-being, development, or regional cohesion (Watts and Stenner, 2012), Q methodology was chosen (Stephenson, 1953; Watts and Stenner, 2012). This approach combines the qualitative depth of discursive analysis with the quantitative robustness of factor analysis, enabling the identification of shared configurations of meaning among participants (Brown, 1993; Watts and Stenner, 2012). Q methodology focuses on the structure of viewpoints, that is, on how individuals organize and prioritize their judgments on a given topic (Brown, 1993; van Exel and de Graaf, 2005; Watts and Stenner, 2012).

Unlike traditional surveys or semi-structured interviews, which focus on capturing the frequency or intensity of individual opinions, Q methodology forces participants to take a position. Its key components are (i) a set of statements representing the full range of aspects relevant to opinions on a specific topic; (ii) a group of participants ranking the statements and explaining their motivations to reveal their implicit priorities and value judgments related to the topic; and (iii) by-person factor analysis to identify groups of participants who have arranged the statements similarly, thus revealing shared discursive perspectives on the topic, which are interpreted and described using both their quantitative and qualitative data.

For this study, Q methodology has particular relevance. As political and institutional actors, mayors often tend to use strategic or diplomatic language. Through its structured design, this approach “forces” them to take a stance by ranking different dimensions of local well-being, such as services, participation, environment, identity, infrastructure, governance, and social cohesion according to their importance for quality of life in their community, thereby making their perspective on what is important for local development explicit. This approach allows shifting the focus from politically neutral or strategically crafted perspectives to underlying value-based viewpoints. This creates a useful empirical basis for designing policies that are more attuned to local specificities (Forrester et al., 2015). It is also an effective method for studying the perception of public policies and territorial governance (Davies and Hodge, 2007; Forrester et al., 2015).

2.3 Theory and Methodology integration

Combining the Capabilities Approach with Q methodology to explore the perspective of mayors offers a unique and original contribution to the literature on quality of life in rural areas, and more specifically in inner areas, both theoretically and methodologically, with Q methodology serving as an empirical translation of the Capabilities Approach. Nussbaum's (2011) ten central capabilities have been operationalized into a set of 20 statements, designed to represent the various forms of freedom and opportunity relevant in the context of the inner areas of Basilicata comprehensively.

When mayors are invited to rank these statements according to their importance for the quality of life in their municipalities, they are not merely expressing opinions but assigning priority to specific capabilities. Their ranking of the statements thus reflects an implicit evaluation of which freedoms are perceived as most significant or constrained within their territory, making their value judgments explicit and translating political and administrative reasoning into terms of effective freedoms.

This process gives Q methodology both epistemic and practical value. By prioritizing, mayors reflect on their own possibilities for action, demonstrating the balance between contextually imposed limitations and the capacity for local intervention. In doing so, they do not merely represent political interests but become sources of knowledge, contributing to a shared definition of what it means to “live well” in their municipality. By combining empirical analysis and theoretical interpretation, the two approaches enable the elicitation of a vision of quality of life not only in the area but also from the area, founded on the experiences and priorities expressed by their local representatives.

3. Research Design

The study was conducted in three main phases: development of the statement set (section 3.1), data collection (section 3.2) and data analysis and interpretation (section 3.3). To ensure a comprehensive and rigorous description of all phases of the research process, from study design to data collection and analysis, and the presentation of results, the reporting checklist for a Q methodology study proposed by Dieteren et al. (2023) was adopted.

3.1 Development of the statement set

The statement set was constructed to cover all possible aspects relevant to opinions on the subject under examination (Damio, 2016). Potentially relevant aspects were identified by combining the capabilities approach with (a) existing literature on quality of life and regional policies (Blecic, 2023; Porta et al., 2022; Punziano and Urso, 2016) and (b) notes from previous interactions with local administrators. This process ensured thematic heterogeneity and the inclusion of contrasting positions, an essential condition for representing the plurality of meanings attributed to quality of life (Zabala et al., 2018).

The ten capabilities were translated into a set of 20 statements, which were formulated in clear, neutral language applicable to the role of mayors, thereby stimulating authentic and comparable reflections across the set. The selection occurred through an iterative theoretical-empirical process, based on criteria of conceptual completeness, contextual adherence, and readability. The screening process followed a deductive-inductive logic: deduplication (removal of redundant statements), reformulation into non-technical language, elimination of negations and double-barrelled items (simplifying statement structure to avoid ambiguity), balancing of tone (including an equal mix of positive and critical statements), and verification of territorial specificity (Hensel et al., 2022). As recommended (Hensel et al., 2022; Sudau et al., 2023), the preliminary set of statements underwent cognitive piloting with an expert (part of the research team) to assess comprehensibility, semantic clarity, and cognitive load. The feedback led to minor lexical revisions and the rebalancing of certain capabilities to prevent semantic overlap.

This process resulted in a final set of 24 statements (see Table 1), of which 20 are directly attributable to the previously delineated capabilities, and 4 were added to capture specific contextual aspects of quality of life that emerged from the broader literature (Cicco et al., 2025; Moliterni et al., 2025; Piras and Pedes, 2025; Shakya and Vagnarelli, 2024; Whitaker, 2024) and previous interactions with local administrators. A table containing the full list of 24 statements linked to the capabilities is available in the supplementary materials (Table S1).

3.2 Data Collection

All 72 municipalities classified under the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) 2021-2027 in the Basilicata region were considered. From this initial set, municipalities classified as “intermediate” and “centres” were excluded, retaining the 59 municipalities defined as “peripheral” and “ultra-peripheral”. The mayors of the selected municipalities were contacted via institutional email, of whom 32 expressed their willingness to participate. Because one participant discontinued the interview midway, the final sample comprised 31 mayors. Participants received no incentives, and their participation was on a voluntary basis. The table containing the coded sample of participating mayors is available in the supplementary materials (Table S2).

The interviews were conducted online via videoconference sessions and lasted approximately 40 minutes, on average. First, mayors were asked to arrange the 24 statements on the grid, which were sent to them by mail before the interview, starting with reading all statements and subsequently placing the statements on the grid according to agreement: from “disagree most” to “agree most”. The forced distribution requires assigning a limited number of statements to the extreme positions on the grid and a larger number to the central ones, thereby reflecting the relative importance attributed to each aspect and facilitating the emergence of value priorities and hierarchies of meaning (McKeown and Thomas, 2013; Watts and Stenner, 2012; Zabala and Pascual, 2016). The grid is shown for illustrative purposes in Figure 1 at the end of this paragraph.

After finishing the ranking, an interview was conducted focused on explaining the motivation for the ranking of the statements. This interview was recorded with the informed consent of participants, ensuring data confidentiality at every stage.

4. Result

Factor analysis conducted using KADE software led to the extraction of 5 factors, which were interpreted and described as five distinct viewpoints among mayors in the inner areas of Basilicata on what is important for local quality of life. Table 1 shows the factor scores of the statements, the explained variance per factor and the correlations between factors. The factor scores correspond to the ranking of the statements on the grid (see Figure 1). In the results, statements are indicated by their statement number and ranking in the factor (e.g., st. 2; +3).

The quotations presented to illustrate the factor interpretations in the Q methodology analysis were translated from Italian into English.

Table 1. Factor scores and characteristics (with * indicating distinguishing statements and C indicating consensus statements).

Nr	Statement	Factor scores				
		1a	1b	2	3	4
1	The local health services are of good quality	-3	+3	-3	+2	-3
2	Essential services such as water, electricity, public transport, internet, schools, pharmacies, and shops selling basic necessities are essential to avoid the abandonment of municipalities	+2	+2	+1	+2	+3
3	Crime rates are low	-1	+3	+3	0	+3
4	The risk of natural disasters (hydrogeological instability) is low	-1	-1	-3*	-1	-1
5	The risk of attacks by wild animals is low	-1	-2	+2*	-3	-2
6	The quality of local roads and isolation pose a risk to the most vulnerable citizens, such as the elderly and disabled	0*	-2	-2	+2	+2
7	Local schools offer good quality education at all levels	-3*	+1	+2	+1	0
8	There are sufficient cultural and recreational opportunities for local citizens	0	-1	0	0	-2*
9	Local citizens feel happy and satisfied with their lives within the municipality I administer	-1	+2	+3	0	-1
10	The depopulation of inland areas has a negative impact on the emotional well-being of the citizens who remain	+3	-3*	-1*	+1*	+2
11	It is important to consider the long-term impact of policy decisions on inland areas	+1	-2*	0	-1*	+2*
12	Regional/national decisions take into account the needs of inland areas	-2	+1	-2	-2	0
13	Inner area communities are inclusive and respectful of diversity (ethnicity, religion, orientation, etc.)	+1	0	+1	-1*	0
14	Citizens actively participate in the social and political life of the municipality	-2	0	0	-1	-1
15	Cooperation between municipalities is essential to maintain essential services such as water, electricity, public transport, internet, schools, pharmacies and shops selling basic necessities in inland areas	0	0	0	+3*	0
16	In the territory I administer, there is a harmonious coexistence between man and nature	+1	+2	+1	0	-1
17	Local policies promote environmental protection and biodiversity conservation	0	-1	+1	-2	+1
18	Traditional agriculture and livestock farming must be preserved as cultural and economic heritage ^C	+2	0	+2	0	+1

Nr	Statement	Factor scores				
		1a	1b	2	3	4
19	There are sufficient recreational opportunities for ALL age groups of the resident population	-2	+1*	-2	-2	-2
20	Citizens can influence political decisions concerning their municipality	+1*	-1	-1	0	0
21	There are sufficient economic/employment opportunities for young people	0	0	-1*	-3	-3
22	Tourism is important for socio-economic development	+2	+1	0	+1	+1
23	The local community values their traditions and cultural heritage ^c	0	0	0	+1	0
24	There should be fewer bureaucratic restrictions and constraints on the use of funds for local development	+3	-3*	-1*	+3	1*
Explained variance		0.13	0.13	0.10	0.14	0.15
Correlations between factors		1a	-0.44	0.19	0.27	0.54
		1b		0.25	-0.01	-0.14
		2			-0.07	0.25
		3				0.45

Viewpoint 1a

Viewpoint 1a outlines a strongly pragmatic vision of local administration, in which three elements are central: the difficulty of operating within rigid bureaucratic procedures, the impact of depopulation and the fragility of essential services on the daily lives of communities, and the conviction that certain territorial resources, particularly sustainable tourism and traditional agriculture, can represent levers for development, provided they are supported by more effective administrative tools. This is a critical but constructive viewpoint, which prioritizes the capacity of local institutions to effect real change.

Mayors with this viewpoint think that bureaucracy and administrative procedures represent a significant obstacle in managing resources dedicated to development (st. 24; +3). They describe a system that delays urgent interventions and limits the capacity for action at the local level. The mayor M_11 observes that *“bureaucracy kills us: a simple electric fence requires five different authorizations”*, while similar frustration comes from M_08: *“resources would be available, but more freedom and definite timelines are needed to use them”*. This demand for more administrative autonomy is accompanied by a critical perception of supra-local institutional levels, which do not adequately consider territorial specificities (st. 12; -3). Regional and national strategies are often perceived as distant: *“they are imposed from above, without knowing our reality”*, states the mayor M_11.

These mayors attach great importance to the social and emotional consequences of territorial abandonment (st. 10; +2), viewing it as a phenomenon that profoundly affects community vitality. In parallel, the idea that adequate essential services are fundamental to counter depopulation emerges strongly (st. 2; +2). Against this background, they also express some reservation about the overall well-being experienced by residents: the view that local citizens are happy and satisfied with their lives receives mild disagreement (st. 9; -1). Rather than suggesting a uniformly negative assessment of life in these communities, this position appears consistent with a broader concern that territorial decline and weaknesses in essential services may constrain residents' quality of life. Indeed, precisely the most crucial services for countering depopulation and fostering quality of life in local communities, like healthcare (st. 1; -3), are perceived as inadequate both in terms of access and continuity of care. *“Waiting times for medical visits are very long, and often there is no clear health point of reference”*, denounces the mayor M_08. The same issue is perceived with schools (st. 7; -3*). Significantly more than in the other viewpoints, the quality of local education is considered insufficient. As the M_11 explains: *“we have a multi-grade class from first to fifth grade: it's difficult to ensure quality education when a single teacher has to follow everyone”*.

Alongside these critical issues for community well-being, mayors with this viewpoint acknowledge the presence of potentially strategic –but largely unexploited– opportunities for sustainable local development, such as slow tourism (st.22; +2) and the preservation of traditional agriculture and livestock farming as cultural and economic heritage (st. 18; +2). The latter is also a consensus statement, indicating that the importance attributed to preserving these traditional activities is not distinctive of this viewpoint but reflects a more broadly shared perspective. Illustrating the perceived potential of local resources for development, the mayor M_21 observes that *“we have unique caves and trails, but they*

are undervalued: with the creation of a network of thematic routes, we could attract visitors all year round". Infrastructural isolation, by contrast, does not emerge as a salient concern in this viewpoint (st. 6; 0*). Although statistically distinguishing, its middle position in the factor array indicates that it is not a defining priority of this perspective. This suggests that, relative to the more prominent concerns regarding essential services and administrative constraints, road quality and isolation occupy a comparatively secondary position.

In terms of local governance, this viewpoint stands out from the other viewpoints in being most positive about the possibility for citizens to influence political decisions (st. 20; +1*). Still, these mayors point to a gap between this potential and active participation in daily practice (st. 14; -2): the mayor M_21 states that *"citizens could participate more, but often prefer to criticize from outside"*, while from M_08 it is added that *"people listen, but struggle to get involved"*. The difference with other viewpoints, therefore, appears not to lie in actual civic participation, but in a more open and trusting perspective from these mayors as compared to the others.

Viewpoint 1b

This viewpoint, somewhat contrary to the previous viewpoint, presents an overall positive vision of quality of life in small municipalities. Daily life is described as stable, safe, and supported by a strong community fabric, where basic services, particularly healthcare, are perceived as adequate for local needs. While acknowledging some structural criticalities typical of inner areas, this viewpoint interprets living in small towns as a satisfactory experience.

In this viewpoint, the most prominent theme concerns public safety, which mayors attribute to strong social cohesion and low crime rates (st. 3; +3). The mayors' words make this lived experience evident: as the mayor M_04 observes, *"crime rates are low because we all know each other; if a child gets lost in a village, you find them after three seconds"*. Even for mayors who load onto viewpoint 1b, while not a top priority, the presence of a good level of local essential services is considered essential (st. 2; +2); indeed, this is accompanied by a positive evaluation of local healthcare services, considered functional and capable of providing adequate coverage for residents (st. 1; +2). The mayor M_17 confirms the positive perception of local healthcare: *"local healthcare works well, we have two public family doctors, a paediatrician, and soon a (local) Community Health Centre"*. Finally, a moderately positive evaluation concerns the availability of recreational opportunities for different age groups (st. 19; +1*), which distinguishes this viewpoint from the others and completes the picture of daily life perceived as satisfactory and not marked by social isolation. This appreciation aligns with the favourable perception of daily well-being (st. 9; +2), further contributing to the representation of balanced communities where stability largely derives from the density of social relationships and the harmonious coexistence between man and nature (st. 16; +2). Local schools are also evaluated positively (st. 7; +1), as is the extent to which regional and national decisions take the needs of inner areas into account (st. 12; +1).

Alongside these clearly positive aspects, the mayors associated with Viewpoint 1b approach local criticalities with an attitude marked by pragmatism and a general tendency to resize their significance. They indeed express a clear rejection of the idea that depopulation generates a significant emotional impact on residents (st. 10; -3*), significantly more strongly than in the other viewpoints. The phenomenon is acknowledged but interpreted as an operational problem to be managed, rather than a source of emotional concern. Similarly, much less than in the other viewpoints, these mayors consider the reduction of bureaucratic constraints a priority (st. 24; -3*), showing a certain distance from the rhetoric of administrative simplification as an essential condition for local development. As the mayor M_17 observes: *"the goal is not to completely eliminate constraints; above all, we must think about two or three fundamental things: transport, infrastructure, and healthcare"*. Also distinctive for this viewpoint is the position regarding the lesser relevance attributed to long-term political planning (st. 11; -2*), which suggests a pragmatic orientation, focused on the concrete and immediate needs of the community. Consistent with this tendency not to frame territorial constraints in particularly critical terms, road quality and isolation are not perceived as a major risk for vulnerable citizens (st. 6; -2).

Finally, in terms of the relationship with the environment, a critical, but not emergency-driven, perception of the impact of wildlife emerges (st. 5; -2). The problem is acknowledged, but treated as a difficulty to be managed rather than a threat. It is noted as a growing criticality, capable of affecting daily life and the perception of security, but without assuming emergency tones. *"We bought cages for wild boars, but the problem remains"* explains the mayor M_17, highlighting the limited effectiveness of available solutions. The natural environment is not perceived in adversarial terms, but as an identity-defining element to be preserved. Mayor M_04 states: *"The environment is everything, it must be preserved. By this, I don't mean I'm against alternative energy, but wind turbines shouldn't be placed above waterfalls"*, showing a balance between landscape protection and the possibility of innovation. This vision also shows how sustainability is understood as an adaptation to the characteristics and needs of the territory, rather than the application of globally imposed models or principles.

Viewpoint 2

Viewpoint 2 offers a balanced interpretation of life in inner areas, where perceived safety, community bonds, and forms of local solidarity continue to play a significant daily role, though this does not translate into an overall positive assessment. This perspective, while acknowledging the strength of social capital and a widespread sense of well-being, is accompanied by a clear awareness of the territory's structural fragilities.

Regarding social cohesion and perceived quality of life, viewpoint 2 highlights a strongly positive perception of daily life in small municipalities. These contexts are described as particularly safe, with a very low perceived crime rate (st. 3; +3), and inhabited by communities generally satisfied with their lives (st. 9; +3). The social climate appears serene, cohesive, and characterized by close relationships that reinforce perceived well-being. As the mayor M_12 states, *“in our territory, we live on a happy island between Puglia, Campania, Calabria [...] I think it’s due to the way my fellow citizens are, very simple”*². The mayor M_25 also confirms this picture: *“we have a low crime rate, and this increases the quality of life”*. In this “happy” perspective, even the local school system is positively evaluated (st. 7; +2), despite geographical marginality. The school represents a fundamental safeguard for the community, a place where *“a place where you can grow well”*, as one administrator observes, and an element that contributes to maintaining ties and continuity in smaller communities.

Alongside its strengths, this viewpoint recognizes a set of significant limitations, especially structural fragilities and institutional detachment. Local healthcare services are perceived as insufficient (st. 1; -3) and often unable to meet the daily needs of the elderly population. The mayor M_26 clearly highlights this: *“We are substituting the Local Health Authority [...] twice a month we collect blood samples for all citizens, at our own expense, to guarantee this service which elderly people would otherwise not receive”*. The quality of the local road network (st. 6; -2) is perceived as an element that accentuates isolation and makes access to services difficult, especially for the most vulnerable segments. From an institutional perspective, a widespread sense of detachment from regional and national policies emerges (st. 12; -2), which are considered insensitive to the specific needs of inner areas. The mayor M_25 emphasizes: *“regional decisions do not follow the indications of inner areas [...] a Minister said we must be accompanied to a slow death”*. Similarly, the mayor M_12 observes that *“many calls for public tenders come from above [...] completely different realities, so they cannot understand the needs of the local area”*. Within this framework, depopulation (st. 10; -1*) is described as a process that progressively compromises the socio-economic sustainability of these territories. The lack of qualified job opportunities (st. 19; -2), recreational activities capable of retaining different age groups (st. 21; -1), and structural criticalities that accentuate isolation are considered the main causes of population loss. The mayor M_26 points out: *“there are not many opportunities [...], but we have requests for welders and skilled workers that we don’t have in the territory”*. The mayor M_12 adds: *“the quality of life is good, but if there were more opportunities, especially for young people, they would not leave”*. The issue of flexibility in the use of funds for local development is also present, albeit moderately (st. 24; -1*), as a need for greater administrative autonomy.

Finally, with regard to the relationship with the environment, the mayors with viewpoint 2 reveal an ambivalent stance. On one hand, the risk of hydrogeological instability is perceived as high and structural (st. 4; -3*), significantly more so than in the other viewpoints. The mayor M_25 states that *“the risk of natural disasters is high”*, while from M_12, the need for preventive interventions is emphasized: *“in my municipality, I have five landslides in five locations [...] we need to invest in prevention; often we have diverted natural water or closed springs to remedy problems, but then after a few years, disaster strikes”*. Alongside this vulnerability, on the other hand, the natural environment is experienced daily as familiar and harmonious. Also distinguishing for this viewpoint, the low perception of risk stemming from wildlife (st. 5; +2*) suggests an established relationship with the local ecosystem. The mayor M_12 summarizes it thus: *“we live in nature; we are accustomed to coexisting [...] it often also represents a tourist element”*. Following this awareness, even recent criticalities, such as the increase in wild boars, are interpreted as consequences of anthropogenic imbalances rather than a natural threat: *“wild boars have become numerous, but it’s an unnatural thing induced by humans”*(M_13). In this context, agriculture and animal husbandry play a crucial role in land maintenance, configuring themselves not only as economic activities but as elements of oversight and ecological safeguard. The mayor M_29 states that farmers are *“individuals who monitor the territory [...] they are lookouts for fires”*, and that the presence of animals contributes to biodiversity and the stability of the local ecosystem.

Viewpoint 3

Viewpoint 3 expresses a vision strongly oriented towards administrative capacity and inter-municipal collaboration as indispensable conditions for the future of inner areas. Mayors who share this perspective describe territories that, despite generally adequate local services, remain exposed to environmental fragilities, infrastructural isolation, and limited opportunities for younger generations. The resilience of these communities, according to this viewpoint, depends on the ability to work together, simplify procedures, and address territorial risks systemically.

Regarding the management of the territory, central in this viewpoint is the conviction that the challenges of inner areas cannot be tackled by a single municipality but require a higher level of institutional coordination. In particular, the inter-municipal cooperation (st.15; +3*) represents a defining and distinguishing element of this viewpoint: sharing functions,

² The reference to Puglia, Campania, and Calabria is used to highlight that, despite being geographically situated between three regions often associated with organized crime, Basilicata does not exhibit the same level of criminal presence. The idea of Basilicata as a “happy island” therefore reflects a widely shared perception that aligns, to a large extent, with the reality of the territory. However, this representation remains a stereotype: it simplifies a complex situation and risks creating rigid contrasts between regions, overlooking the diversity of local experiences and dynamics.

resources, and strategies is considered an obligatory step to compensate for small administrative size and territorial dispersion. As the mayor M_05 emphasizes, *“collaboration between municipalities is essential to maintain services like water, transport, schools, and essential shops in inner areas”*. From this perspective, networking is not an additional option, but the *“way of operating for the future”* to continue guaranteeing basic services even to the smallest municipalities (M_05). This strong focus on cooperation is closely connected to the demand for administrative simplification (st.24; +2), perceived as a necessary condition to effectively utilize available funds and accelerate interventions. In this perspective, local administrations aspire to greater managerial flexibility, allowing them to act promptly and in coordination. The mayor M_31 describes new digital compliances as an additional burden, observing that *“all these steps, the digital signature, digital identity (SPID)³, are an additional problem; paper might have been better”*. Similarly, the mayor M_23 highlights how the *“volume of documentation, authorizations”* ends up discouraging citizens and businesses, blocking initiatives that could retain population and investments in the territory.

This demand for a more agile and coordinated management structure is deeply rooted in the need to protect a local service system that, despite everything, is perceived as functioning generally well. Indeed, both healthcare (st.1; +1) and schooling (st.7; +1) are evaluated in moderately positive terms, as is the role of tourism for economic development (st.22; +1). In several cases, mayors assert the quality of local educational provision: the mayor M_07 states that the town's school, despite the challenges of multi-grade classes, *“school provides a solid foundation and a good level of preparation for successfully progressing through the subsequent years”*. Similarly, the mayor M_28 describes the school building as *“a beautiful, very colourful school, with all environments compliant”*, the result of investments that have transformed it into a cutting-edge facility. Communities are not perceived as lacking essential infrastructure, but as contexts where a local welfare network exists that needs to be protected and strengthened. Precisely for this reason, depopulation is interpreted both as a risk to the future sustainability of services and as a source of emotional stress for those who remain (st.10; +1*). Population loss affects not only the economy but also the quality of life and the sense of security of those living in these territories. The mayor M_31 emphasizes that depopulation *“has a negative impact on those who remain”*, fuelling a *“repetitive, continuous mantra of ‘there's nothing, nothing can be done’”* which affects the psychological well-being of the population. Even where the quality of personal life is perceived as good, as the mayor M_05 observes (*“I personally live well here with my family”*), specific *“difficulties”* nonetheless emerge for young and old, especially in terms of opportunities and access to services. This relatively pragmatic assessment of community life is also reflected in the position on social inclusion. Compared with the other viewpoints, these mayors are somewhat less inclined to characterize inner-area communities as inclusive and respectful of diversity (st. 13; -1*). Although the relatively moderate ranking does not indicate a strongly negative assessment, its distinguishing position suggests that inclusiveness is less readily regarded as an established strength of local communities in this viewpoint.

In this regard, the absence of adequate economic opportunities for young people (st.21; -3) emerges as one of the main threats to the vitality of inner areas. The mayor M_31 answers the question about job opportunities with an *“absolutely not”*, explaining that, to stop young people from leaving, *“an economic, social, and labour plan is necessary [...] from the Region [...] in agreement with the central Government”*. Similarly, the mayor M_07 notes that in his municipality *“there is no kind of opportunity for young people”*, who *“are forced to emigrate”* and, once graduated, *“almost all [...] never return”*. Even in the presence of local potential in tourism, traditional agriculture, cultural heritage, the difficulty of creating stable and qualified jobs represents a critical issue that makes the future of these territories uncertain. The mayor M_05 recounts having used ministerial funds to stimulate the opening of essential activities and having created a dedicated youth desk, but acknowledges that the opportunities *“are absolutely not sufficient, young people have no other choice but to leave the territory”*. This condition is compounded by the perception that regional and national policies do not sufficiently consider the needs of inner municipalities (st.12; -2), in conjunction with the presence of excessive constraints on the use of funds for local development. The mayor M_23 denounces *“too many constraints on the use of inner area funds”* and emphasizes that lawmakers do not consult *“the greatest connoisseurs of their territory, i.e. local administrators”*. These elements strengthen a sense of institutional marginality that directly affects the capacity of territories to create opportunities for younger generations.

This perception of marginality extends beyond the socio-economic sphere to the structural fragility, where the awareness of territorial risks characterizes inner areas. The quality of roads and infrastructural isolation (st.6; +2) are perceived as factors that particularly expose the most vulnerable people, while the risk of landslides, floods, and instability is not minimized at all (st.4; -1). The mayor M_05 states that hydrogeological risk *“is one of the problems to be addressed”* both locally and nationally, recalling landslides and damage to road and housing infrastructure. The mayor M_23 describes an even more pronounced picture, speaking of *“severe hydrogeological instability”* and warning that *“if we are not careful, one morning we will find ourselves in the river”*. These environmental vulnerabilities intersect with a pronounced concern regarding wildlife, considered a real and growing problem for the daily safety of residents (st.5; -3). M_23 reports that *“we have wild boars everywhere”* and those sightings occur *“even among the houses in the village”*,

³ The Italian Public Digital Identity System (SPID) is a national digital authentication system that allows citizens and businesses to access online public services through a single, secure set of credentials. It provides standardized, legally recognized digital identification across government platforms and accredited private services.

to the point that the situation is “*completely out of control*”. The mayor M_31, on the other hand, highlights the increasing number of “*accidents due to wild boars*” and damaged vineyards, emphasizing that the risk is very low for people but “*very high*” for crops, vehicles, and property. In this context, safety is understood broadly: not only public order, but protection from environmental and territorial dangers that can isolate or harm communities as a whole.

Viewpoint 4

Viewpoint 4 expresses a perspective that centres on quality of life based on the continuity of essential services, local security, and administrative planning capable of looking to the long term, beyond immediate emergencies. Administrators who identify with this vision describe territories that maintain a delicate balance, supported by minimal infrastructure.

The stable presence of essential services, such as water, electricity, transport, schools, and shops, is perceived as indispensable for the daily lives of residents (st. 2; +3). Mayors emphasize how precisely these basic services allow the community to maintain stability and autonomy, as they represent the boundary between the possibility of staying and the necessity of leaving. As the mayor M_03 observes, “*to be able to live even in small realities, basic services are essential [...] where they are lacking, it becomes difficult to stay*”. While material aspects provide the foundation for residency, the perceived serenity of the community plays an equally pivotal role. In this regard, a strong sense of local security reinforces this perception of quality of life, representing an identifying trait of these territories. They are described as protected places, characterized by low crime rates (st. 3; +3), where a widespread trust persists among residents. The mayor M_27 summarizes this perception: “*crime hardly exists here anymore [...] we still leave our cars unlocked and the keys in the front door*”.

However, this reassuring social atmosphere stands in stark contrast to the material reality of the territory, creating a paradox where residents feel socially protected but structurally abandoned. Indeed, mayors who share this viewpoint highlights various criticalities related to local services and infrastructure. Infrastructural isolation, primarily linked to road quality, emerges as a problem that contributes to making daily balance more fragile (st. 6; +2). The mayor M_18 emphasizes that “*some roads are in poor condition, and in some areas, they are even severely damaged*”, with consequences that become particularly burdensome for the elderly and vulnerable people. Local healthcare services are also negatively evaluated, considered insufficient compared to the needs of the population (st. 1; -3). The mayor M_30 recalls that “*we have big health problems [...] ambulances often arrive without a doctor on board*”, while the mayor M_09 stresses that “*in a community of elderly people, the doctor is the beacon*”, but it is difficult to guarantee their presence. Local schools, by contrast, receive a neutral evaluation in terms of educational quality (st. 7; 0), but the qualitative accounts point to concerns about the sustainability of the service itself in the face of demographic decline. Even in municipalities where the service is still maintained, as the mayor M_09 recounts, referring to a kindergarten with only two children, the school appears as a fragile outpost, constantly on the brink. Finally, environmental vulnerability is recognized (st. 4; -1), but it does not occupy a central position as an immediate physical risk; rather, it is a concern linked to the future compromise of territorial balance if other fragilities are not addressed first.

Closely connected to the above-mentioned fragility, depopulation emerges as a grave concern in this viewpoint. It is considered both a consequence of the difficulty in maintaining services and a cause of their further weakening (st. 10; +2), profoundly impacting collective well-being and the demographic resilience of the territory. In this viewpoint, in fact, essential services and demographic dynamics are part of a self-perpetuating vicious cycle: without services, the population decreases, and with less population, it becomes difficult to maintain services. As the mayor M_24 states, “*when a soul leaves [...] a way of comparison, of creating employment and development for the entire territory, is lost*”, indicating that the loss of residents simultaneously reduces social cohesion and development possibilities. Alongside this, the lack of economic and professional opportunities for young people represents the strongest criticality (st. 21; -3), and is a key factor fuelling depopulation. The mayor M_30 emphasizes that “*more than 90% of young people who go to study outside never return*”, while the mayor M_03 speaks of the need to “*strengthen economic opportunities for younger people*”, as many find no reasons to stay. The weakness of cultural and recreational offerings (st. 8; -2*; st. 19; -1) also contributes to this scenario, making these places less attractive not only for families and younger residents, but also for older ones. The mayor M_27 highlights the need to “*create leisure for over 50s*” and to have meeting places, while the mayor M_18 emphasizes that “*there are no spaces where the elderly can meet and make a conversation*”. This limited availability of cultural and recreational opportunities should not, however, be conflated with the role of local traditions and cultural heritage, which do not emerge as a defining priority within this viewpoint (st. 23; 0). Notably, this is a consensus statement across the five viewpoints, indicating that its relative positioning is broadly shared rather than a feature that differentiates this particular perspective.

In this context of challenges and fragilities, the ability to plan in the medium-long term takes on particular importance (st. 11; +2*). Administrators with this viewpoint believe that securing a future for these territories requires stable and lasting strategies, rather than episodic or emergency interventions. As the mayor M_27 states, “*we are planning actions that will yield results in four or five years [...] it takes time to create an economy*”. This is naturally accompanied by a marked sensitivity towards the need to simplify administrative processes (st. 24; +1*). This simplification is considered useful for governing intrinsically fragile territories with greater effectiveness and fewer bureaucratic obstacles. The mayor M_09 clearly describes this difficulty: “*the mayor is now a bureaucrat [...] we are submerged in paperwork and*

compliances”, highlighting how bureaucracy can significantly slow down the implementation of essential interventions and the realization of long-term development strategies.

5. Discussion

The analysis conducted on the mayors of municipalities in the inner areas of Basilicata region reveals five distinct perspectives on quality of life, each rooted in different administrative sensibilities, political priorities, and interpretations of territorial challenges. Despite this heterogeneity, a shared core of concerns emerges, including access to essential services, depopulation as a structural threat, security (understood both as low levels of crime and protection from environmental risks), and the strength or fragility of social cohesion. These elements constitute the common ground from which divergent interpretations unfold.

The main lines of differentiation among the viewpoints concern not so much which problems are acknowledged, but rather how these problems acquire meaning for local administrators. A first fault line separates those who tend to normalize local criticalities, as observed in the more optimistic viewpoints (1b and part of 2), where vulnerabilities are recognized yet reinterpreted in light of strong interpersonal relations, from those who adopt a problematizing logic (1a, 3, and 4), reading structural weaknesses as systemic threats. A second axis of differentiation concerns the role attributed to the institutional dimension: in viewpoint 1a, bureaucracy is the principal obstacle; in viewpoint 3, it is part of a broader governance problem that requires inter-municipal cooperation; in viewpoint 4, it is a knot to be untangled to safeguard a fragile equilibrium; whereas in viewpoint 1b it remains in the background relative to day-to-day administrative management. A further source of divergence lies in the scales through which territorial vulnerability is interpreted: some mayors (vp 2 and 3) adopt a territorial–environmental perspective, emphasizing hydrogeological risks, wildlife, and mobility infrastructure; others (vp 4) privilege socio-demographic dimensions; still others (vp 1a) interpret vulnerability primarily as institutional. Finally, depopulation is understood in different ways: for viewpoints 3 and 4, it is the key lens through which the future of the territory is interpreted; in viewpoint 1a, it is a symptom of the gap between supra-local policies and actual needs; in viewpoint 1b, it is viewed as an administrative rather than an identity-related issue; in viewpoint 2, it coexists with a predominantly positive narrative of community life.

Overall, the viewpoints do not simply express positions that are more or less optimistic; rather, they articulate different interpretive logics through which mayors assign meaning to the same empirical elements. These logics, rather than the evaluations of individual aspects, constitute the foundation of the observed divergences and suggest that policies targeting inner areas must contend not only with material problems, but also with differentiated cognitive and value frameworks.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study contribute to advancing the theoretical discussion on quality of life in inner areas by integrating Q methodology, the Capabilities Approach, and the viewpoint of mayors. This approach aims to show that capabilities are not merely individual functions but deeply territorialized processes (Beltramo et al., 2024; Mantino et al., 2022; Robeyns, 2011; Weckroth et al., 2022). The emergence of five viewpoints highlights the presence of plural interpretations of quality of life, in line with scholarship describing inner areas as systems shaped by both structural fragilities and place-specific resources (Barca et al. 2018; Blecic, 2023; Dezio et al., 2021; Grignoli et al., 2024; ISTAT, 2022; OECD, 2018, 2020).

A first theoretical contribution concerns the confirmation of the idea of inner areas as “fragile yet cohesive” systems. Mayors emphasize structural criticalities, including the erosion of public services, depopulation, geographic marginality, and socio-economic vulnerability, in line with scholarship portraying inner peripheries as territories shaped by long-term imbalances (Bernard and Šimon, 2017; Collantes et al., 2014; Fabbriatti et al., 2022; Long et al., 2022). At the same time, the viewpoints depict a context in which safety, the quality of neighbourly relations, interpersonal trust, and everyday well-being remain high, corroborating studies showing that, in rural areas, quality of life cannot be reduced to a mere “deficit” in comparison with urban contexts (Beltramo et al., 2024; Bertolini and Pagliacci, 2017; Zarecor et al., 2021). This coexistence of fragility and cohesion resonates with the literature on territorial resilience (OECD, 2018; Ferretti et al., 2022), which emphasizes the capacity of communities to absorb, adapt, and transform in the face of both shocks and long-term processes (demographic decline, service retrenchment, environmental change). The findings of this study confirm that inner areas are not simply “spaces of deficit,” but contexts in which different forms of freedom and vulnerability are negotiated on a daily basis, and where social and territorial capital can be mobilized as an active resource (Carrosio, 2020; De Toni et al., 2020; Rimondi, 2025).

A second theoretical contribution concerns how different forms of vulnerability are prioritized and combined within local administrators’ viewpoints. The service, environmental, and governance dimensions discussed below should not be understood as categories emerging independently from the research design, since related aspects were already represented in the statement set. Rather, the Q analysis shows how these dimensions acquire different salience and are configured differently across the five viewpoints (Barca and Terribile, 2019; Coppola, 2022, 2023; Fabbriatti et al., 2022). Against

this background, three broad dimensions provide a useful analytical synthesis of the forms of vulnerability articulated by the mayors:

1. *Service vulnerability*, primarily linked to the viability of proximity services such as healthcare, schools, transport, and everyday essential services. This profile confirms studies identifying the improvement of citizenship services as a central axis of place-based policies in inner areas (Barca and Terribile, 2019; Blecic, 2023; OECD, 2020; Porta et al., 2022).

2. *Environmental vulnerability*, concerning hydrogeological risk, wildlife management, rural territorial stewardship, and the maintenance of natural capital. This aligns with scholarship discussing a “socio-environmental crisis” in inner areas, where abandonment and under-utilization amplify risks (Carrosio, 2020; Ferretti et al., 2022; Viccaro et al., 2021).

3. *Governance vulnerability*, encompassing bureaucratic constraints on the use of funds, a perceived disconnect from regional and national policies, limits in administrative capacity, and the need for inter-municipal cooperation. This is coherent with analyses foregrounding multilevel governance, institutional capacity, and inter-organizational networks in fragile contexts (Pike et al., 2017; van Popering-Verkerk et al., 2022).

Taken together, these dimensions reflect the interconnected nature of service provision, territorial and environmental fragilities, and governance capacity in shaping rural quality of life, consistently with preliminary evidence reported by Andreoli et al. (2026). In line with this work, the threefold synthesis should be understood not as an emergent taxonomy of vulnerability, but as an analytical lens for interpreting the different viewpoints. The contribution therefore lies in showing how service-related, environmental, and governance constraints are differently prioritized and combined in mayors’ interpretations of quality of life. Conceptually, the three dimensions can be read as combinations of territorial *unfreedoms* (Sen, 1999) that constrain the exercise of capabilities not only for individuals, but also for institutions and socio-ecological systems.

A third theoretical contribution concerns the role of mayors as boundary actors between institutional levels and local communities. This role has already been recognized in the literature on the National Strategy for Inner Areas (Lucatelli and Monaco, 2018; Lucatelli et al., 2019) and in studies on territorial leadership (Beer et al., 2021; Sabbi, 2023). The results show that mayors are not merely policy implementers, but producers of territorial interpretations and mediators between supra-local policies and local needs. This is consistent with analyses that frame local decision-makers as intermediaries between institutions and communities, capable of co-producing policies and development visions (Ansell and Torfing, 2021; Forrester et al., 2015).

A further theoretical contribution stems from the integration of Q Methodology and the Capabilities Approach, which allows capabilities to be operationalized into concrete and situated statements, thus highlighting the subjective and territorialized nature of interpretations (Alkire, 2016; Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2020; Intriago Zambrano, 2024; Zawilińska et al., 2023). The viewpoints make it possible to identify a core set of priority capabilities: health and access to proximity healthcare, local education, environmental safety, institutional agency, and economic and cultural opportunities for young people (Beer et al., 2021; Beltramo et al., 2024; Lucatelli and Monaco, 2018; Mantino et al., 2022; Sabbi, 2023; Weckroth et al., 2022). These capabilities form an interpretive structure that illuminates the relationship between well-being, territorial constraints, and institutional agency (Long et al., 2022; OECD, 2020).

5.2 Limitations and future research

The study shows that inner areas are not merely fragile spaces, but systems in which well-being, vulnerability, and institutional capacity are interwoven, and in which the interpretive work of local decision-makers plays a decisive role in shaping place-based policies that genuinely reflect the territories they aim to serve. While these findings offer substantial theoretical insights, they must be interpreted in light of several methodological and empirical limitations that, in turn, open avenues for future research.

First, the exploratory nature and “pilot” design of the study rely on a non-probability sample of 31 mayors. While this sample size is appropriate for the purposes of Q methodology, which aims to identify the diversity of existing viewpoints rather than their statistical distribution, one interview was discontinued midway because... and 27 mayors did not respond to the invitation to participate. We have no information about why these mayors did not respond and no other information to assess whether non-responders differ systematically from responders in their view on the topic. Therefore, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to the broader population of local decision-makers without further validation using larger samples. The five views described here can be said to exist among mayors in the Basilicata region, but we cannot exclude the possibility that additional views exist in the region. Second, the investigation focuses exclusively on the Basilicata region. Although this represents an emblematic case of an “entirely internal” region, the specific historical, cultural, and geographical characteristics of the Lucanian context warrant caution when extending these interpretations to other territories (e.g., in Northern or Central Italy), which may exhibit different socio-economic dynamics. Hence, similar views may exist as well as other views, which makes this an interesting topic for further research. A third limitation concerns the exclusive focus on the institutional perspective. While the analysis of mayors’ perceptions is valuable given their role as mediators, it does not include the direct viewpoints of citizens, youth, or other local stakeholders (e.g.,

entrepreneurs). This leaves open the possibility of a misalignment between the priorities perceived by administrators and the daily lived experiences of the population. This seems an interesting avenue for further research. Finally, from a methodological standpoint, the translation of Nussbaum's ten capabilities into a set of statements entails inevitable interpretive choices regarding selection and synthesis.

In light of these considerations, the implications for future research suggest several directions. It would be advisable to replicate the study in other Italian or European regions to verify whether the identified viewpoints are transversal or tied to specific territorial characteristics, thereby facilitating a comparative analysis. Furthermore, future investigations could adopt a multi-level approach by administering the same Q-set to citizens or by integrating the methodology with objective quantitative indicators. This would allow for an assessment of the alignment between political supply and demand, potentially identifying areas of latent conflict. A further line of research could explore the nexus between perceived vulnerabilities and institutional capacities, analyzing how governance models and inter-municipal cooperation influence the mayors' interpretations. Finally, from a longitudinal perspective, it would be valuable to repeat the study over time to evaluate how external shocks or the implementation of specific policies (such as the PNRR⁴ and the SNAI 2021-2027) might modify the perception of "unfreedoms" (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999) and local priorities. Such developments would contribute to refining policy design tools, ensuring that strategies for inner areas are increasingly responsive to the real needs of those who inhabit and govern them.

Beyond their relevance for future research, the viewpoints identified in the study can also be translated into operational guidance for policymakers, helping to define the conditions that local administrators perceive as essential for improving quality of life in inner areas. These implications are outlined in the following section.

5.3 Policy Implications

The perceptions that emerge from the five viewpoints provide a clear picture of operational priorities for policies targeting inner areas. Across all perspectives, mayors reiterate that strengthening essential services is the primary condition for counteracting depopulation: proximity healthcare, local schooling, transport, digitalization, and basic shops represent the minimum threshold that enables communities to remain viable. The fragility of these services fuels a vicious cycle that undermines well-being, social cohesion, and the ability to attract young families.

Alongside this, many administrators insist on the need for bureaucratic simplification that would allow available resources to be used more rapidly and with greater autonomy, reducing the administrative burden and enhancing the capacity for action of small municipalities (particularly in viewpoints 1a and 3). Inter-municipal cooperation also emerges as an indispensable direction: the shared management of services, administrative functions, and strategic interventions is seen as a necessary condition for ensuring efficiency and continuity, especially in smaller and more dispersed territories.

A further policy domain concerns the strengthening of environmental prevention systems. Mayors' attribute considerable importance to hydrogeological risk management, infrastructure maintenance, and wildlife control, emphasizing that these vulnerabilities are not exceptional events but structural conditions of everyday life in inner areas. Investing in prevention, widespread maintenance, and territorial stewardship, often supported by farmers and livestock breeders, thus represents a shared priority, particularly in viewpoints 2 and 4. This also connects to the need to address the generational challenge in a structural manner: the lack of professional, cultural, and recreational opportunities for young people is perceived as a major driver of outmigration and loss of human capital. Policies should therefore support youth entrepreneurship initiatives, territorially rooted training pathways, social spaces, and programmes that facilitate the return of qualified young people. Finally, the storylines reveal a significant distance between citizens, local administrations, and higher levels of government. Strengthening civic participation is therefore essential for rebuilding trust and reducing the perception of institutional marginality. Continuous participatory processes, community pacts, and forms of engagement that support shared responsibility and decision-making are needed. Overall, these implications outline a policy agenda that leverages the knowledge of local administrators and intervenes on services, governance, prevention, and community capital to sustain quality of life and demographic resilience in inner areas. This differentiated policy agenda is also consistent with Andreoli et al. (2026), whose preliminary findings highlight the inadequacy of *one-size-fits-all* approaches and the need for rural development strategies that respond to locally grounded perceptions and capacities.

In sum, the operational implications emerging from the viewpoints show that the future of inner areas depends on the ability of public policies to consistently and pragmatically support what mayors identify as the indispensable conditions for livability: stable essential services, streamlined administrative procedures, institutional cooperation, environmental

⁴ The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) is the strategic document outlining the package of investments and reforms submitted by Italy to access resources from the European *Next Generation EU* (NGEU) program, established to revitalize the economy following the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The Plan, which has a timeframe extending to 2026, is structured around six main Missions: digitalization, ecological transition, infrastructure for sustainable mobility, education and research, inclusion and cohesion, and health. For inner areas, the PNRR represents a crucial source of funding aimed at reducing territorial disparities and improving accessibility to essential services.

prevention, opportunities for young people, and stronger civic participation. Only by addressing these domains in a coordinated manner can the resilience of these territories be transformed into a concrete path toward durable and inclusive development.

6. Conclusion

This pilot study applied Q methodology through the lens of the Capabilities Approach to explore the subjective perceptions of mayors in the inner areas of the Basilicata region regarding quality of life and territorial vulnerabilities. By shifting the focus from objective indicators to the interpretations of local decision-makers, the research offers a nuanced reading of the inner area condition, revealing that it is not a monolithic reality but a complex landscape of conflicting priorities, structural constraints, and latent resources.

The emergence of five distinct viewpoints demonstrates that the fragility of these territories is not interpreted uniformly. While some administrators interpret their context primarily through the lens of institutional barriers and bureaucratic “unfreedoms” (Viewpoint 1a), others emphasize the resilience of social capital and community safety (Viewpoints 1b and 2), or focus on the need for governance innovation and inter-municipal cooperation (Viewpoint 3). Conversely, the most critical perspectives highlight a vicious cycle between service erosion and depopulation (Viewpoint 4), warning that the loss of essential functions threatens the very survival of these communities.

Theoretically, the study challenges the narrative of inner areas as merely “spaces of deficit.” Instead, it confirms their dual nature as “fragile yet cohesive” systems: territories where profound structural vulnerabilities (in services, infrastructure, and environmental management) coexist with high levels of relational well-being and environmental quality. The findings articulate the concept of vulnerability not as a unitary phenomenon, but as a triadic structure comprising service vulnerability, environmental vulnerability, and governance vulnerability. This suggests that the capability to “live well” (or capabilities) in these areas is contingent upon a delicate balance between material assets (roads, hospitals) and immaterial assets (trust, administrative capacity).

From a policy perspective, the research underscores the inadequacy of standardized, top-down solutions. The mayors’ narratives outline a clear agenda for the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) and the implementation of the PNRR: infrastructural investments must be coupled with administrative simplification, flexible governance models, and policies aimed at retaining human capital, particularly the youth. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on territorial stewardship suggests that these areas should be valued not merely for their landscape, but as active guardians against hydrogeological instability and biodiversity loss.

In conclusion, despite the limitations regarding its exploratory nature and regional focus, this study highlights the crucial role of mayors as “boundary actors”. Their capacity to interpret local needs and mediate external constraints constitutes a fundamental resource; recognizing and integrating these subjective viewpoints into policy design is not merely a methodological exercise, but a necessary step to ensure that development strategies are not only technically sound but also politically viable and socially sustainable. By foregrounding the perceptions of mayors, this work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of what it means to “live well” in rural areas, offering conceptual and empirical tools for designing place-based policies oriented toward the expansion of capabilities and substantive freedoms, capable of intervening in an integrated manner across social, environmental, and institutional dimensions.

In sum, while future research must continue to amplify these voices by extending the comparison to other regions and integrating the perspective of citizens, the current results already indicate that the future of inner areas depends on the capacity to align public action with locally expressed priorities.

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Accepted manuscript

Supplementary material

Table S1. Q sort composition.

The table below presents the 24 statements that comprise the final Q-set.

No.	Statement	Source
1	The local health services are of good quality	Nussbaum (2011)– Life & Bodily Health
2	Essential services such as water, electricity, public transport, internet, schools, pharmacies, and shops selling basic necessities are essential to avoid the abandonment of municipalities	Nussbaum (2011) – (Life & Bodily Health)
3	Crime rates are low	Nussbaum (2011) – Bodily Integrity
4	The risk of natural disasters (hydrogeological instability) is low	Nussbaum (2011) – Bodily Integrity
5	The risk of attacks by wild animals is low	Nussbaum (2011) – Bodily Integrity
6	The quality of local roads and isolation pose a risk to the most vulnerable citizens, such as the elderly and disabled	Nussbaum (2011) – Bodily Integrity
7	Local schools offer good quality education at all levels	Nussbaum (2011) – Senses, Imagination and Thought
8	There are sufficient cultural and recreational opportunities for local citizens	Nussbaum (2011) – Senses, Imagination and Thought
9	Local citizens feel happy and satisfied with their lives within the municipality I administer	Nussbaum (2011) – Emotions
10	The depopulation of inner areas has a negative impact on the emotional well-being of the citizens who remain	Nussbaum (2011) – Emotions
11	It is important to consider the long-term impact of policy decisions on inner areas	Nussbaum (2011) – Pratical Reason
12	Regional/national decisions take into account the needs of inner areas	Nussbaum (2011) – Pratical Reason
13	Inner areas communities are inclusive and respectful of diversity (ethnicity, religion, orientation, etc.)	Nussbaum (2011) – Affiliation
14	Citizens actively participate in the social and political life of the municipality	Nussbaum (2011) – Affiliation
15	Cooperation between municipalities is essential to maintain essential services such as water, electricity, public transport, internet, schools, pharmacies and shops selling basic necessities in inner areas	Nussbaum (2011) – Affiliation
16	In the territory I administer, there is a harmonious coexistence between man and nature	Nussbaum (2011) – Other Species
17	Local policies promote environmental protection and biodiversity conservation	Nussbaum (2011) – Other Species
18	There are sufficient recreational opportunities for ALL age groups of the resident population	Nussbaum (2011) – Play

No.	Statement	Source
19	Citizens can influence political decisions concerning their municipality	Nussbaum (2011) – Control Over One’s Environment – Political
20	There are sufficient economic/employment opportunities for young people	Nussbaum (2011) – Control Over One’s Environment – Material
21	Traditional agriculture and livestock farming must be preserved as cultural and economic heritage	Piras & Pedes (2025)
22	Tourism is important for socio-economic development	Shakya & Vagnarelli (2024)
23	The local community values their traditions and cultural heritage	Whitaker (2024)
24	There should be fewer bureaucratic restrictions and constraints on the use of funds for local development	Cicco et al. (2025); Moliterni et al. (2025)

Table S2. Sample.

The table below shows anonymous mayor codes and associated factor loadings used to interpret shared viewpoints in the Q Methodology analysis.

ID	Factor	Loading
M_01	-	-
M_02	4	0.5626
M_03	4	0.7284
M_04	1b	0.6685
M_05	3	0.5853
M_06	-	-
M_07	3	0.4801
M_08	1a	0.7276
M_09	4	0.4687
M_10	-	-
M_11	1a	0.6655
M_12	2	0.6390
M_13	2	0.4693
M_14	-	-
M_15	-	-
M_16	-	-
M_17	1b	0.5351
M_18	4	0.7169
M_19	-	-
M_20	-	-
M_21	1a	0.5248
M_22	-	-
M_23	3	0.5696
M_24	4	0.5993
M_25	2	0.7951
M_26	2	0.6070
M_27	4	0.6213
M_28	3	0.4253
M_29	2	0.4061
M_30	4	0.7202
M_31	3	0.6642