

MAPS ITALY – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Growing up in an ‘inner area’ The views of children and young people living in inner Cilento

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The research team would like to acknowledge and thank the children, young people and adults in Inner Cilento who actively participated in and supported all phases of this research project, which ultimately made it possible.

Introduction

The characteristics of the local area in which children live have a fundamental influence on their daily lives. Growing up in an area that is ‘on the margins’ threatens children’s rights, well-being and development. For example, in an area with no local secondary school, a blocked road, or weak social cohesion, everyone experiences these problems, irrespective of income. This highlights the fact that poverty is not always restricted to specific individuals or households, but can affect the lives of everyone living in a particular locality, whether urban or rural. Eurostat’s subnational data for 2021 provides insights into the varied landscape of poverty across the EU27. On average, the at risk of poverty and social exclusion was higher for those living in rural areas (22.5%) compared to cities (21.9%) and towns (20.9%). Noteworthy variations emerge

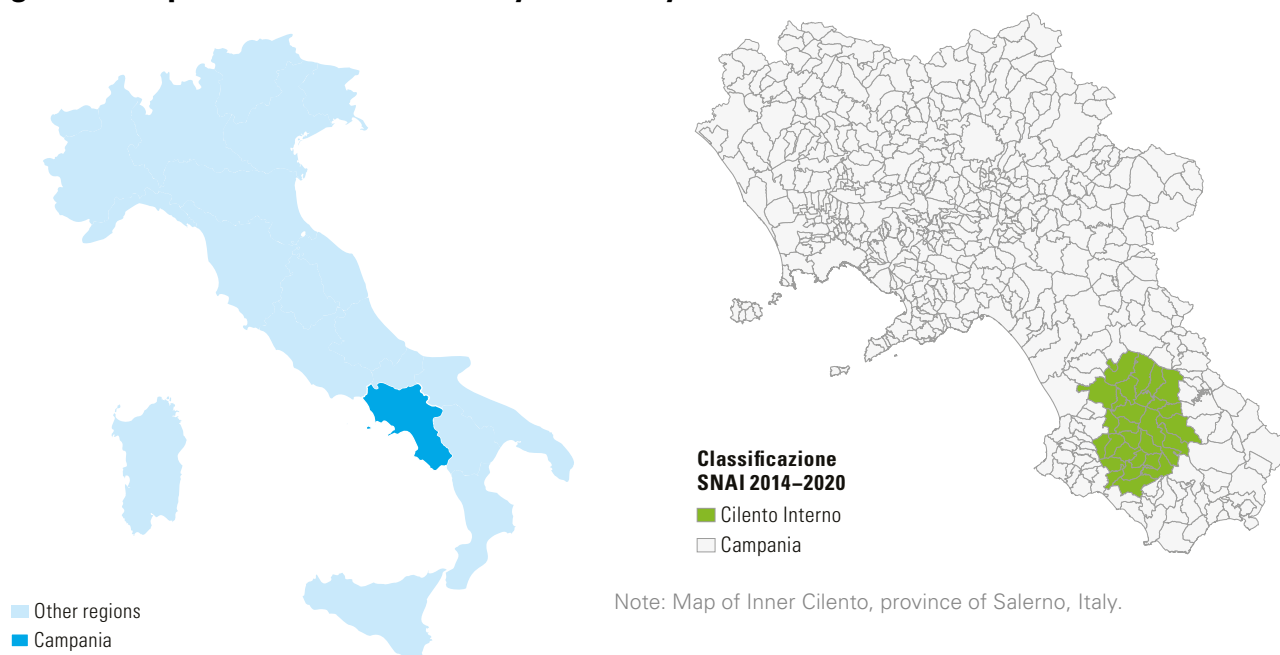
when delving into specific countries. Poland, Portugal, and Ireland stand out with higher rural than urban poverty rates. On the other hand, Belgium, Denmark, and Austria present contrasting dynamics, showcasing higher urban poverty rates¹. This nuanced picture highlights the importance of understanding local contexts in addressing poverty disparities across Europe and the other world regions.

In Italy almost half (around 4,000) of the *comuni*² are classified as 'inner areas'. While these areas benefit from a rich natural and cultural heritage, they are characterized by low population density, shrinking and ageing populations, are situated in mountainous or isolated zones, and often have limited infrastructure and difficulties in accessing services.

Growing up in an '*inner area*' is a pilot of the MAPS (Monitoring and Analysing Poverty Across Space) research project, conducted by UNICEF Innocenti Global Office of Research and Foresight. The study, carried out in inner Cilento (*Figure 1*), is a novel initiative aimed at understanding and measuring context-based child poverty through listening to children. The objective is to create a comprehensive picture of the opportunities and barriers that children experience in growing up in this area which has great natural beauty but faces major social and economic challenges.

In the longer term the intention is to refine and adapt the MAPS methodology and implement it in a range of contexts globally. A second pilot has been conducted in an area of Indonesia and results from that study will also be published shortly.

Figure 1: Map of the area covered by the study



1 [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Urban-rural_Europe_-_income_and_living_conditions#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20the%20EU's%20at,and%20suburbs%20\(20.8%20%25\).](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Urban-rural_Europe_-_income_and_living_conditions#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20the%20EU's%20at,and%20suburbs%20(20.8%20%25).)

2 A *comune* is a small administrative area with an elected mayor, usually focused around a town or village.

Why this research?

Although there is a growing number of studies on 'inner areas' in Italy, few have focused on childhood, and those which have done so have tended to concentrate on educational deprivations rather than taking a broader view of child poverty. Children who grow up in these areas face both advantages and challenges:

- on the one hand, they enjoy secure communities with a wealth of history, culture and natural beauty;
- on the other hand, access to basic services is often problematic; and barriers to mobility between the towns and villages limit the development of social networks and opportunities for extracurricular activities.

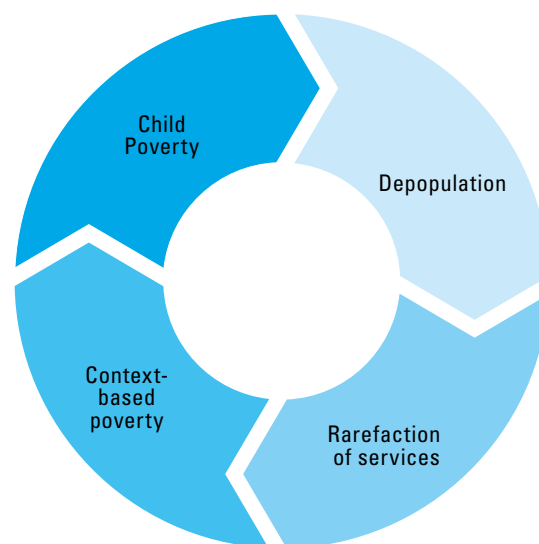
The lack of essential services pushes families to consider moving elsewhere, thus accelerating population loss and leading to a further reduction in services and living conditions (*Figure 2*).

Understanding children's experiences in this environment is essential not only to improve their lives but also to stop this downward spiral and reconsider policies relevant to children living in this context.

It is for this reason that UNICEF Innocenti chose this area to undertake a pilot research study as part of the MAPS (*Monitoring and Analysing child Poverty across Space*) project which aims, in diverse contexts around the world to:

- develop an understanding of context-specific child poverty from children's perspectives;
- create a conceptual framework based on children's experiences of their local area;
- promote a reflection on what children inherit from past generations and what they will leave for future ones, in order to create a model of sustainable local and regional development;
- bring the findings from this work to the attention of policymakers in order to inform the development of innovative child-centred strategies.

Figure 2: The vicious circle of depopulation and poverty



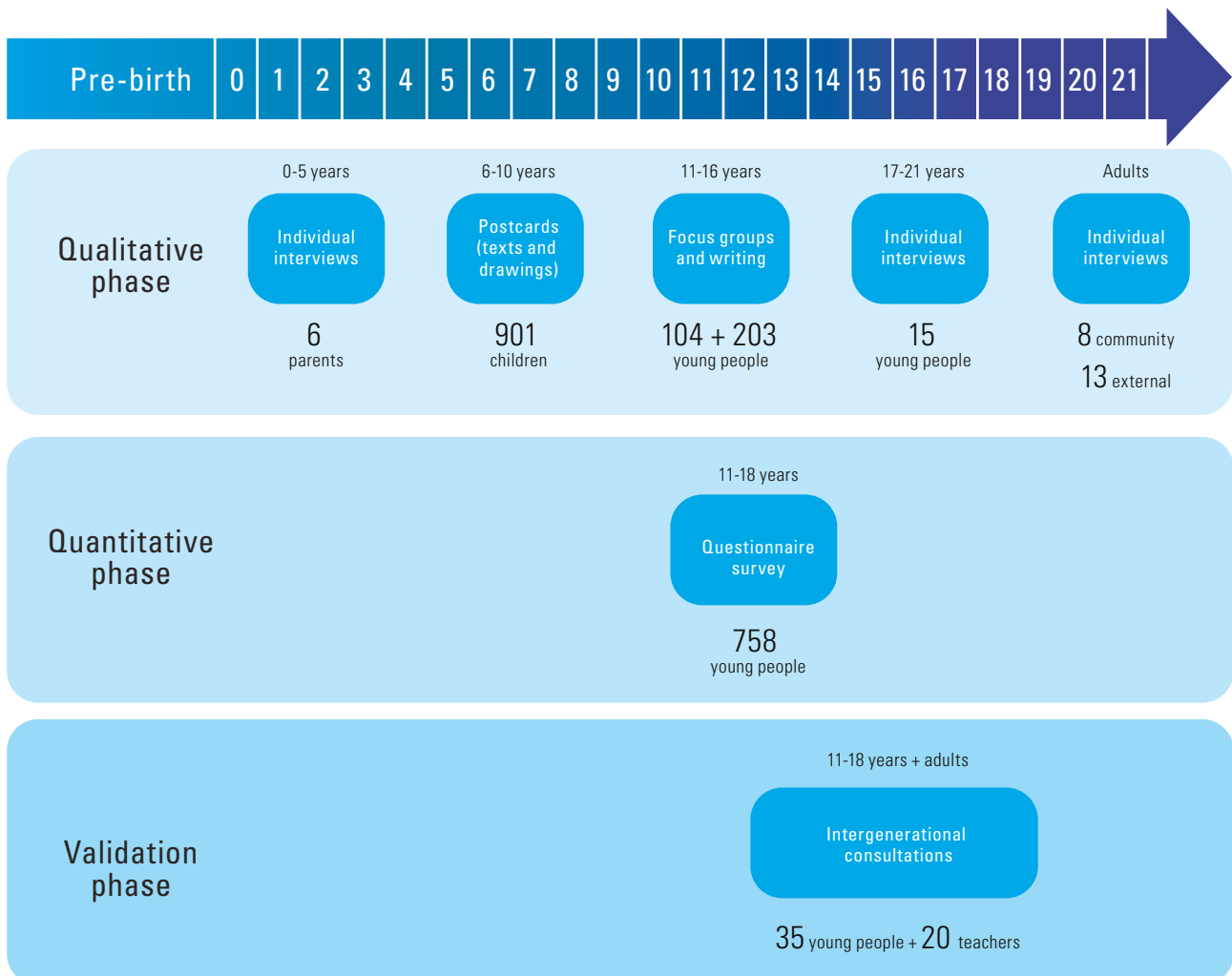
WHAT ARE THE DEFINING FEATURES OF MAPS?

- MAPS recognizes children as competent agents with perspectives that have meaning and value in terms of analysing social conditions of the local area.
- MAPS places priority on children’s voices in order to identify the aspects of the local area that are most important for them.
- MAPS aims to identify the extent to which the local area enables children to have a good quality of life.
- MAPS adopts a life-course approach, analysing opportunities and limitations in each phase of childhood.

How was the research conducted?

MAPS adopts a participative mixed-method approach (qualitative and quantitative) using research tools suitable for different age groups of children as shown in *Figure 3*.

Figure 3: Research phases, methods and numbers of participants



What are the main results?

Inner Cilento is a complex and diverse area, in terms of infrastructure and socio-demographics. The *comuni* of the area are categorized into three groups – *cintura*, *intermedi* and *periferici* at increasing travelling time from an urban centre with public services. The specific locality in which a child lives can have a substantial effect on her/his development and longer term opportunities. In addition to this diversity within the area, each dimension of the characteristics of the area has different impacts at different stages of childhood.

The study highlights that for very young children, the area is perceived by parents as a safe and positive environment in which to raise children, although there are still some challenges related to access to essential services such as health care. Life in the small villages of inner Cilento has two important positive aspects for parents: the supportive community and the tranquil atmosphere. In these regions, the period of pregnancy can, in many ways, be a serene experience for women. However, the absence of a maternity ward, maternal and child health clinics, and neonatal transport services presents a significant challenge during pregnancy and the initial months of the child's life.

Upon the arrival of the child, parents find themselves embraced by a supportive community, providing them with assistance, affection, and closeness. Nevertheless, they also face the challenge of handling the numerous and sometimes complex needs of the newborn on their own.

The research also shows that children of primary school age have a strong attachment to their village or town and to the natural and cultural heritage of their local area. They feel very positive about the place in which they live, which provides a safe and peaceful environment with strong emotional family and community ties. In the postcards used as a research tool, children depicted churches, colorful houses, and other elements of the historical and cultural heritage, highlighting how these elements are evident in the streets, alleys, and historic buildings that make up the fabric of the community in these towns and villages.

When asked about what can be improved in their area, many children of this age express a wish for better infrastructure and public spaces – e.g. large and safe playgrounds, swimming pools, facilities for skating or roller-blading, and shopping centres.



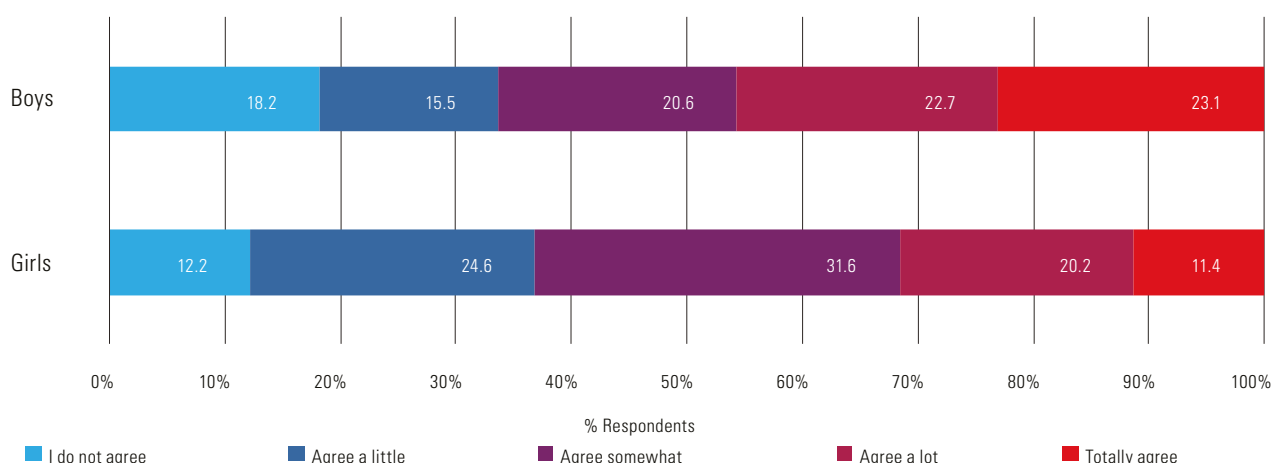
For older children and young people, the picture is different. They still show a strong sense of belonging but as they grow older the local area feels less adapted to their wishes and needs. Around 8 in 10 young people aged 11-18 anticipate that they will not remain living in the area in the future.

The results emerging from the study can be summarized as follows:

School: overcoming challenges and acting as a hub. The research underscores the crucial role of the education system, profoundly impacted by population decline due to outward migration. School closures, mergers, and mixed-age classes result from this trend. High turnover of teaching staff, lacking long-term prospects in the area, directly affects children’s education, especially those requiring additional support. Most secondary schools are located outside the area, forcing young people to choose based on travel distances rather than educational goals. Long daily commutes limit free time, affecting daily activities and social opportunities. Despite challenges, schools remain a vital community focal point, collaborating with social services and offering support, such as mental health services not available locally

Facilities and spaces for free time. Another relevant dimension is the facilities and spaces available for free time. Young people become less satisfied with this aspect of their local area as they get older. While younger children seem to have enough spaces to play and socialize, suitable facilities for adolescents are more scarce, especially for girls (*Figure 4*). The natural environment, which is a strong characteristic of the area, also becomes more marginal and seen as less relevant as children move into adolescence.

Figure 4: Are there enough places to play and spend time in the area where you live?



Note: Authors’ elaboration on data collected with the MAPS questionnaire. The data refers to 14-18 years old children.

Out-of-school activities and local area differences. The phenomenon of depopulation affects the availability of sports and other clubs; while the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the disappearance of such facilities. In the more remote areas, a larger proportion of children live in low-income households, and this contributes to the lower participation of these children in extracurricular activities.

Health care services. This research highlights important issues relating to health services. Although Inner Cilento benefits from an environment with low levels of pollution, there is a risk of “health deserts” that mean limited access to medical care. The lack of localized paediatric services for extended periods, and the long journey times to hospitals, create substantial problems, especially for children with disabilities or chronic illnesses.

“If you are ill, by the time you get to hospital, you could be dead. There are a lots of stories about children too. My father got burned. They had to call a helicopter”.

Student, 11-13 years

The closure of food shops. The economic situation is evidenced by the closure of local food shops and the limited availability of produce. This means that people have to travel to a larger urban centre to do their food shopping or rely on weekly markets and mobile food vans selling fruit and vegetables that come from time to time. The decline in local businesses, such as a bakery or a greengrocer, make it difficult to meet basic food needs.

The central importance of transport. The transport infrastructure is another challenge, as the system is inadequate and roads are often blocked due to landslides or flooding. The local bus services only operate for limited hours, mainly during the school day, which means that young people have few opportunities to move around outside of these hours. Sustainable transport alternatives are scarce and practices such as car-sharing are not widespread.

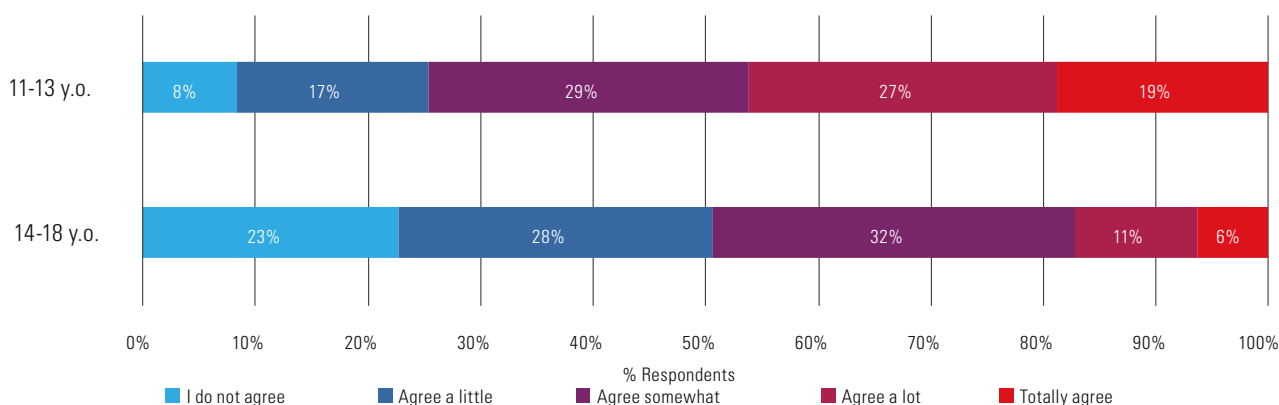
A strong sense of belonging. Despite these challenges, a strong sense of community belonging among the young people emerges from this study. Many of them are proud of their area, aware of its natural beauty and its rich cultural heritage. However, as they get older, they become more aware of the difficult dynamics within the community and the challenges that they face.

A wish to participate in the life of the community. Participation in community activities is restricted to specific roles and opportunities (for example, acting as a waiter during a local festival), and there are limited opportunities for young people to have a voice in decisions which nevertheless affect them directly (such as how to organize community events). This creates a generational divide between adolescents and adults within the community, and leads young people sometimes to avoid active participation in these events.

Community cohesion and divisions. The young people of Inner Cilento retain a strong sense of community and shared solidarity. This solidarity is based on reciprocal help and on the awareness of living in a small community where everyone knows one another. All the same, the presence of positive role models is limited. There is a common perception that few adults work in tangible ways for the communal well-being of the village or town and for children’s futures.

Relationships with institutions. Young people tend to feel less trust as they get older. The poor maintenance of the locality, unfinished public works and, in some cases, the perception of vested interests leads many young people to feel disaffected and/or to conclude that the only way of changing things is through community action rather than policies (Figure 5).

Figure 5 – Does local policy prioritize the well-being of young people?



Note: Authors’ elaboration on data collected with the MAPS questionnaire.

A safe and harmonious childhood. Inner Cilento offers a safe environment for children to grow up, with low levels of crime and strong community cohesion. The main risks are linked to poor maintenance of public spaces and to the presence of some wild animals.

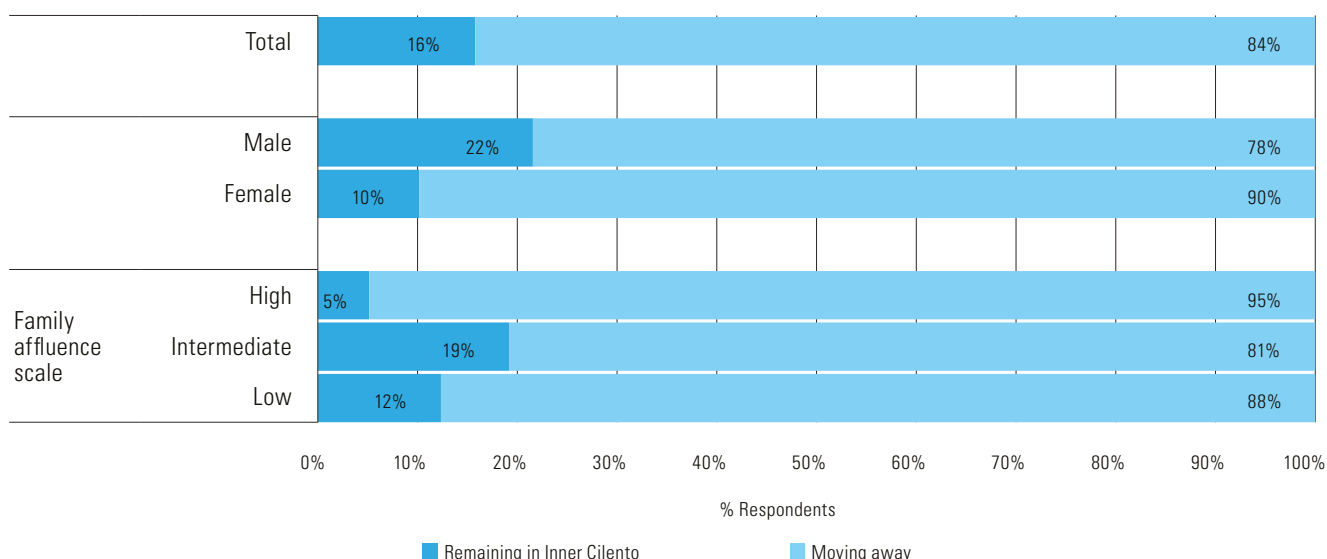
Strongly rooted relationships with families and friends. Young people view family relationships as fundamentally important, and satisfaction with this aspect of life is higher among better-off families. Friendships developed in these communities are often deep-rooted, and result in long-lasting connections. However, with shrinking populations, opportunities for such relationships are becoming more scarce.

Economic and material conditions. The research shows clear inequalities in children’s living conditions, particularly in more remote areas.

Mental well-being. A factor that promotes positive well-being is that children experience autonomy at an early age, but on the other hand young people often have concerns about their future prospects.

Individual and collective aspirations. Some young people hope to explore new horizons, while others envisage staying and building a career. Although there are examples of so-called *restanza*³, these are exceptions. In fact, depopulation appears to adversely affect young people psychologically and many struggle to imagine a different future within the area. This pattern is evident throughout Inner Cilento. Less than one in five young people envisages a future in their place of origin (*Figure 6*).

Figure 6: Percentage of children who envisage remaining in Inner Cilento or moving away as adults



Note: Authors' elaboration on data collected with the MAPS questionnaire.

Hopes and wishes for the future. The children of Inner Cilento would like better roads; libraries and swimming pools; cinemas and shopping centres; better care and maintenance of the environment; and greater opportunities to participate in community life. In general, they hope to see the end of “windows that close and never reopen” and to have hope of future possibilities in the place where they live.

3 People who actively choose to remain.

What are the policy recommendations?

It is vital to create a collective awareness of the urgent need to develop the area starting with a revival of local communities. Priority must be given to investments in services, in children and young people, and in the community. The following are specific key recommendations:

1. Stem the tide of depopulation through improvements in health and social services:

- Guarantee access to gynaecological and paediatric services, and support reproductive health, ante-natal courses and post-natal support.
- Offer mental health services, in particular for adolescents, and provide support for families to be able to visit specialists in larger population hubs.

2. Develop schools to become focal points for culture and citizenship as well as education:

- Develop multi-disciplinary centres with early years childcare and education services and family support workers.
- Connect learning to the local environment, promoting outdoors education, teaching about the environment, and school trips to local areas in order to forge a link between students and their natural surroundings.
- Provide greater resources and training for teachers and students in mixed-age classes.
- Create incentives for teachers to remain in the area.

3. Facilitate age-appropriate mobility for children and adolescents:

- Improve transport links between small villages with shuttle buses, car-sharing and cycle routes.
- Ensure effective road maintenance to avoid interruptions to mobility.

4. Strengthen community ties:

- Involve *community social workers* and *community psychologists* in order to recreate links and promote synergy within communities.
- Organize community activities, cultural and sporting events that engage more communities to strengthen the sense of belonging.

5. Improve the range of activities available to children and adolescents:

- Strengthen access to out-of-school activities in collaboration with the administration of the *comuni* and other local institutions.
- Involve children and families in the co-creation of solutions adapted to their needs.
- Improve the maintenance of play areas and parks with facilities for children, involving the local community and organizing days of voluntary work.

6. Involve children and adolescents in decision-making:

- Facilitate children's role as active participants in decision-making processes.
- Create community councils for children and promote volunteering and citizenship projects in schools.



Disclaimer

The content presented in this summary document is supported by the data provided in the extended version of the report. For a more in-depth understanding of the methodologies, analytical tools, and statistical sampling, please refer to the complete version of the report, available in its extended form on the UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight website.

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