

# OpenCoesione and Monithon - a transparency effort

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## Abstract

### Context

OpenCoesione is the first portal about the fulfilment of investments and projects planned by the Italian central government and by the Italian Regions with the 2007-2013 European Cohesion funds. Together with Monithon, it is a “transparency tool” whose aim is to foster participation of the citizens and efficiency of the public sector bodies in order to improve the implementation of development policies. By now it is one of the best Open Data portal in Italy quality-wise.

### Objective

Our goal is to show the utility of these portals, how this open information are helping the civil society and how the quality of the data is managed publishing these data.

### Method

We focus on how these data are being used in the real world showing some concrete examples keeping an eye on the quality of the data

### Results

We present some evidences on how open data can positively affect the public sector bodies and the spending of funds

### Conclusions

In Italy there is a serious problem of under-spending of the Cohesion funds and in time of spending reviews and low GDPs it is even a worse problem. OpenCoesione and Monithon can help solving some of these inefficiencies.

## **OpenCoesione - a project of opening, transparency and reuse of data about the Cohesion policies' operations**

OpenCoesione<sup>1</sup> is the first portal about the fulfilment of the investments and projects planned by the Italian central government and by the Italian Regions with the 2007-2013 European Cohesion funds. The data about these projects are published on the portal in order to make the citizens able to evaluate if the projects will satisfy their needs and if the related funds are employed in an efficient way. At the time of this writing, it contains data about 750.000 projects, worth 75 billion Euros of financings. Data and information about territorial Cohesion policies are available on the portal, specifically: projects, funding, locations where they intervene, involved subjects and completion times.

OpenCoesione is designed to be used by normal citizens as well as by sector specialists such as journalists, civil servants, policy makers, public managers, entrepreneurs: the data can be viewed

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.opencoessione.gov.it/>

in an interactive way with graphs and maps (Fig.1) and they can be downloaded as raw data in the form of csv datasets.

The aim of OpenCoesione is to foster transparency, participation of the citizens, tracking of the money not only for the citizen, but also for the public sector and, more in general, development. On the portal it is also available a feedback procedure for advices, warnings for errors or missing projects, requests for specific elaborations of data and for sending examples of reuse of data.

The sources of the data are related to EU structural fund<sup>2</sup>, the central monitoring systems fed by the funds' beneficiary public sector bodies; and with regard to Italy's national Development and Cohesion Fund, also the resolutions of the Interministerial Committee for Economic Planning (CIPE), which assigns resources to single interventions. In particular the information about the 2007-2013 funds are gathered by a single monitoring system managed by the General State Accounting Department (RGS – Ragioneria Generale dello Stato) of Italy's Ministry of Economy and Finance. The regional and national government that manage the funds are therefore the principal sources for the information published on the OpenCoesione portal.

OpenCoesione data are released under the licence CC BY-SA 3.0<sup>3</sup>. Therefore it is possible to reproduce, distribute and communicate data and analyses to the public, also for commercial purposes.

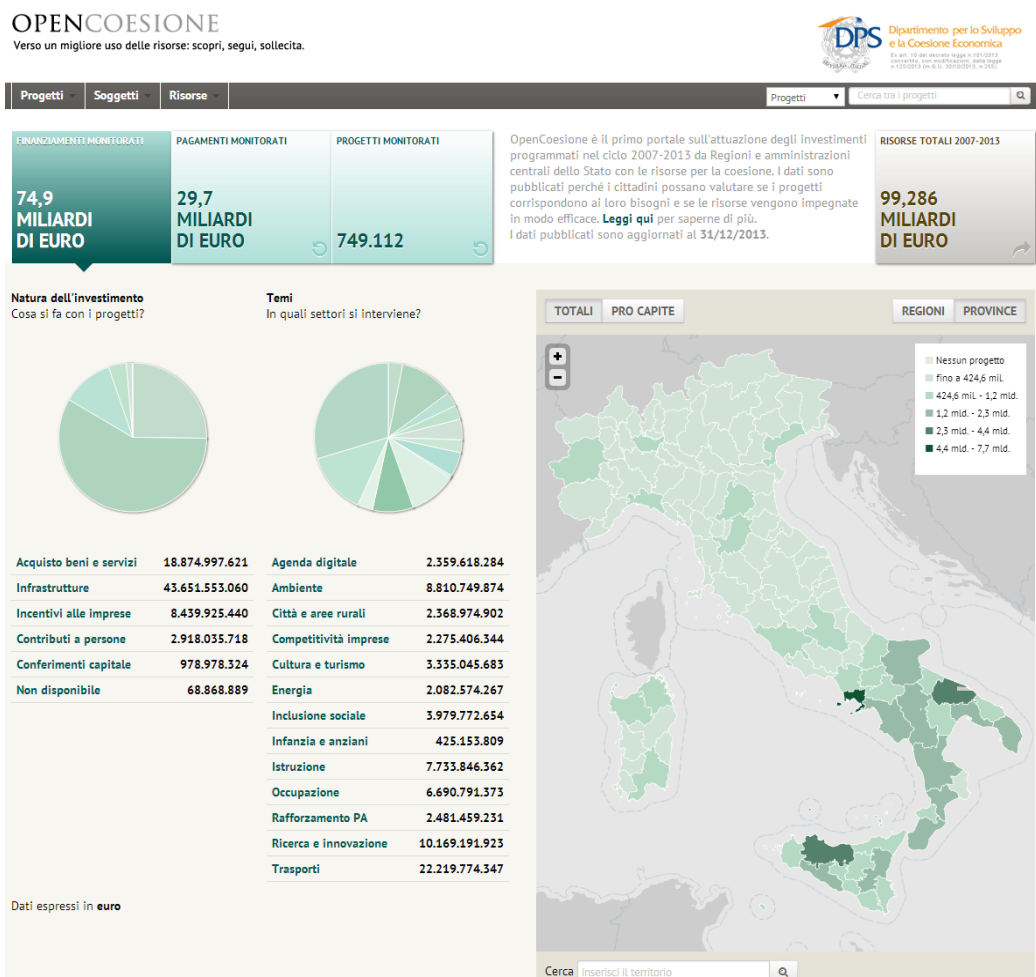


Fig.1 OpenCoesione's interactive interface and maps

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structural\\_Funds\\_and\\_Cohesion\\_Fund](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structural_Funds_and_Cohesion_Fund)

<sup>3</sup> <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

## Visits on OpenCoesione

Since its launch OpenCoesione has had a good impact showing that there is a great interest in the open data made available by the Italian government.

Since its launch in July 2012 until March 2013:

- 700.000 pages have been visualized
- 140.000 unique visitors
- 180.000 visits
- 8% from foreign countries
- 2 minutes average time on site
- 1000 downloads of the full “projects” file

## Monithon - citizens' collaboration to help transparency

Monithon<sup>4</sup> is an independently developed initiative to promote the citizen monitoring of projects funded by the Cohesion policy in Italy. Monitoring is possible thanks to the combination of citizens' collaboration and open government data. The goal is to check the thousands of projects funded by both the EU and the State through Cohesion Policy.

The Monithon initiative takes this transparency challenge even further than OpenCoesione: it asks citizens to actively engage with open government data and to produce with them valuable information. The goal is to improve citizens' use of open data to make them feel closer to public policies and to let them know how the public money and EU funds have been spent. By contributing to Monithon, besides giving advantages to the whole community, citizens are also helping the policies themselves: they can signal errors, report on the actual development of projects, fill in missing information, and eventually evaluate the efficiency of the funding. As explained on the website of Monithon<sup>5</sup>: “ "Moni-thon" comes from "monitor" and "marathon", and this is precisely what the platform seeks to help with: an intensive activity of observing and reporting. Citizens, journalist, experts, researchers – or all combined – collect information on a specific project from the database and upload it on the website. This information – which can be in the form of interviews, quantitative data, pictures, videos... – is then aggregated and geo-referenced on the Monithon platform, to create a form of civic, bottom-up, collective storytelling.”

Moreover, thanks to Ushahidi<sup>6</sup>, an application for smartphones, it is possible to participate in Monithon at any time. Anyone can do this individually, but if done collectively, during the Monithon Days, the whole activity increases its importance and therefore its effectiveness. The Monithon Days are basically events in which a group of people explore a specific area and gather information about projects of local interest.

## Benefits of Monithon

The lack of transparency on how public money is spent and the lack of control over the projects statuses are two of the main reasons for the slow pace in implementing development policies. This is a particularly hot topic in Italy at present given the low absorption rate of EU Structural Funds<sup>7</sup> (Katsarova, 2013). Monithon Days and singular reports have already occurred with success in several locations, even if Monithon is still just in its beta version.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.monithon.it/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.monithon.it/page/index/2>

<sup>6</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ushahidi>

<sup>7</sup> just 40% of the funds are absorbed, it's one of the worst in Europe, a useful picture is given here:

<http://www.insideurope.eu/node/403>

Over 43 major project have been monitored, 22 of them in 2014. Problems have been detected in several projects, some of them have been stopped for many years due to project approval issues (e.g: the rail circuit in Palermo has been stopped for 9 years<sup>8</sup>), or they have suffered several delays due to inefficiencies<sup>9</sup>. Once the problems and the defective projects have been discovered it is way easier to take the necessary steps for both the central government and the citizens which can choose other policy makers and public managers.

## Quality of Open Data

In Italy most of the information is dispersed across a large number of managing authorities and lots of the available data are published in PDF format; they qualify for one star only according to the Five Star Open Data evaluation (FSOD)<sup>10</sup>, in fact they lack machine readability. During the latest years there has been an increasing use of the Open Data by the public sector bodies in Italy<sup>11</sup>, even if the level of openness of other countries like the UK, is still far to reach.

In OpenCoesione, however, datasets are published in a machine readable and non proprietary csv format (deserving three stars FSOD). Moreover, together with the data, a good set of metadata is provided, making the understanding of the dataset easier to process and elaborate for all kind of users.

Different datasets groups, regarding distinct type of fundings<sup>12</sup> are published, however the structure remains the same for all of them. In each group there are different datasets: “projects” (representing the funded projects), “subjects” (that is either the Programming Authority, or the recipient of the funding), “locations” (representing projects’ location data) and “payments” (payments made for each project)<sup>13</sup>. For each dataset there is a standard set of attributes, for example for “projects” there are 74 attributes describing: financial values, description values, time values and flags (warning values for incoherences).

Before being published the data undergoes through some processing, performed by the central monitoring system managing received data from the local governments, in order to guarantee readability and coherence (the processed information are marked with the suffix DPS\_ on the datasets).

During this process the data are verified taking into account different aspects, for each section (identification data, financial data, information over the subjects and procedures) completeness correctness and coherence<sup>14</sup> are controlled with several different tests. Analyzing 70.264 projects, several errors have been found doing this kind of controls: 530 errors in the ID of the project (either missing, or wrong), 4245 errors/incoherencies in financial sections, 1098 errors in the location of the projects, 185 incoherencies in procedures’ informations (Romano, 2013).

After this quality checks, some minor data quality issues have still been found by the authors of this paper on the published data:

- a small percentage of fundings appear to have “suspect” values (below 50€, they might be expressed in thousands of Euros instead of Euro units);
- there are some problems of completeness in the sections regarding the start/end day of a project;

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.monithon.it/reports/view/95>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.monithon.it/reports/view/105>

<sup>10</sup> <http://5stardata.info/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.dati.gov.it/content/infografica>

<sup>12</sup>type of fundings: European Structural funds, funds for Cohesion and Development, CIPE funds

<sup>13</sup>further information here: <http://www.opencoesione.gov.it/progetto/en/>

<sup>14</sup>e.g.: between procedural data and physical data, or between start/end date

- concerning the description of the project, there is some problem in understanding the project's categorisations (a further semantic study would be beneficial);
- the structure of the dataset "payments" is not so clear.

For a deeper analysis on Open Data quality based on intrinsic metrics, a technical report containing also a case study is already available (Vetrò, Torchiano, 2013).

These data quality issues do not invalidate the utility of the open information provided, as is still possible to keep track of the projects, but it is helpful to denote that better controls during the input of the data in the system would be beneficial.

## Results

OpenCoesione, collecting informations in a single place, opening the data that are available and offering an extremely wide number of variables on single projects offers a great opportunity for better managing the Cohesion funds. One of the most direct results we can observe, beside a greater citizens participation, is more effort from local governments trying to keep efficient procedures and more control of the spending from the central government. Secondly, OpenCoesione is also a great pilot project for showing to other Italian public sector bodies how OpenData can be managed.

## Conclusion

The OpenCoesione portal together with the Monithon project provide analysis and monitoring on the use of Cohesion policy resources offering information, accessible to anyone, on what is funded, who is involved and where. The Monithon days have been particularly effective in finding inefficiencies and "zombie" projects<sup>8</sup>, this is one of the first evidences of this transparency effort's effectiveness.

Ultimately, OpenCoesione represents an attempt to: firstly, improve policy effectiveness through better knowledge on which kind of investment projects are actually carried out in the territory; secondly, enhance coordination among the local governments responsible for implementing the projects; and, thirdly, provide more public scrutiny on who benefits from the resources (also with the aim to avoid corruption and fraud). The final aim of the project is to encourage greater public participation and collaboration and have an active role in trying to avoid waste of the funds.

## References

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