



The experience of Bio-districts in Italy

Introduction

In 2009 the Italian Association for Organic Agriculture (AIAB) launched the first bio-district in Italy. A bio-district is a geographical area where farmers, citizens, tourist operators, associations and public authorities enter into an agreement for the sustainable management of local resources, based on organic principles and practices, aiming at the fulfilment of the economic and socio-cultural potential of the territory. They act according to the principles and methods of the organic production and agro-ecology. Each Bio-district is marked by lifestyle, nutrition, human relations and nature. It results that agricultural productions are more valuable and typically characterized, hence more appreciated by the market.



Figure 1. Bio-district farmers' market

The bio-districts represent an innovative approach for a sustainable, integrated and participatory territorial development which builds around the environmental, social and economic dimension by:

- I. Promoting participatory landscape design and adopting agroecological system approaches at field level;
- II. Finding and creating solid and equitable local markets;
- III. Enhancing land access to the young generations;
- IV. Simplifying organic certifications schemes for producers;
- V. Enhancing environmental awareness and local traditions;
- VI. Recognizing food sovereignty and culture identity of the local communities.

The objectives of the bio-districts can be grouped in three main areas:

- **Economic:** making agriculture more remunerative by applying a system approach at the field level and create new market opportunity for producers. At farm level practices able to use inputs more efficiently are promoted while inputs (when needed) are purchased collectively in order to decrease costs. At market level the bio-districts aim at building up a short supply chain by stimulating local market, public procurement and tourism. Group organic certification schemes are promoted to reduce costs and enhance the supervision within the bio-district.
- **Environmental:** making agriculture more sustainable by applying practices able to reduce the environmental impact of farming on natural resources, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and build up a diversified landscape. Also well adapted local varieties are enhanced in order to save and make use of the local biodiversity.
- **Social:** Favouring rural employment and enhancing social capital through facilitating land access to young generations, enhancing aggregations and knowledge exchange between different stakeholders and recognizing the role of farmers as the real ecosystem stewards.



Description of the Agroecology system

The Cilento Bio-district

The first bio-district was launched in the Campania region in South East Italy in an area inside the National Park of the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni. It covers an area of 3,196 square kilometres and includes 37 municipalities, 400 organic farms (23% of tot. organic producers in Campania) and 2,300 hectares. The Cilento bio-district area is recognized as World Heritage Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO.

The bio-district was created based on the request of a group of organic farmers which pushed local authorities to the development of a local organic market. 10 regional municipalities promoted a series of workshops and meetings, involving AIAB and other organization. These meetings shaped the concept of the bio-district. In 2009 the agreement between the different municipalities was signed and the bio-district was officially formed with the multiple goal of finding and implementing joint actions for inclusive territorial development strategies. Those actions included pilot organic group certification, setting up production guidelines for farmers, awareness campaign of sustainable agriculture production along with public procurement schemes to promote Mediterranean diet and local organic consumption in schools and hospitals canteens, and local administration offices.

In 2011 a non-profit Bio-district of Cilento association was created in order to ensure structured coordination of the bio-district activities. The bio-district involves a number of different actors, such as producers, consumers, farmers groups, local authorities, operators of the agro-food supply chain and local training and research centres. A multilevel bottom up approach is at the basis of the bio-district and is adopted to design interventions, changes adjustments and future development plan of the area.



Figure 2. Landscapes of the Cilento bio-district

Main activities

The idea behind the bio-district approach is to create and reinforce links that would benefit everyone involved: organic farmers would get better market access, consumers would benefit from transparency about the origins of their food and enjoy fresh, organically grown local products, the tourist operators would offer new activities and destinations (eco trails and agro-tourism farms) while public authorities would ensure food security and rural employment. The multifunctional approach is the very innovation. It allows to incorporate various fields of agriculture combined with other farming activities: eco-tourism, education, culture, leisure, landscape preservation.

Prevalent activities in Cilento bio-district focus on the promotion and valorisation of the bio-excellences of the territory as well as the encouragement of the organic transition along the traditional agro-food supply chains (legumes, black pork and black goat, Cilento white fig, olive oil, honey, alici di menaica, goat caciocotta, buffalo mozzarella, etc.). Most of the farms in the Cilento bio-district are small-size (about 5 ha) family-run enterprises often with multifunctional organisation (i.e. offering accommodation, gastronomy, education, ecosystem services and other services). The main products include vegetables, pulses, fruits, chestnut, olive and grapes, cheeses and livestock products. The high



number of mixed farms are the building blocks of a diversified landscape typical of the Mediterranean rural areas and reduce as much as possible the use of external inputs and favor nutrient recycling and ecological processes. Yet, about 50% of the inputs are purchased externally. Seeds are sourced from the local nursery and from the “seed savers initiative” which produces traditional varieties able to thrive in low input systems. To date 20% of the seeds used in the bio-district come from this initiative. About 56, 95 and 407 varieties of respectively cereal, vegetables and fruits, are available for farmers and conserved in the Museum of Germplasm of traditional varieties. If other inputs are needed, they are purchased through farmers association to decrease costs per unit of input.

Initial activities focused on creating a network of organic farms, producer associations, bio-city organizations, caterers, eco-tourism operators, and consumers, through short supply chain initiatives. In few years, the Cilento Bio-district had attracted a large number of local actors and produced other initiatives such as bio-spiagge (Bio-Beaches), Bio-sentieri (Bio-Trails) and an, eco-tourist Cilento Bio-district Guide.

Outcomes of the practices

The short value chain

The short value chain is one of the strengths of the bio-district. The agricultural production and related processed products are sold directly by producers or through farmers associations. Direct marketing includes on farm sales, farmer’s markets, purchase groups and the e-commerce platform and count for 75% of the bio-district economic flow. The public procurement, restaurants and tourists facilities (HO.RE.CA) represent 15% of the sales while the traditional distribution –which includes local, regional and national organic shops and supermarkets - only accounts for 5%.



Figure 3. Farmers market

Export mainly concerns wine and olive oil and is a minor market channel with 5% of the sales. Overall 40% of the production is consumed locally while the tourist sector absorbs 55% of the production. In this short supply chain the different associations involved in the bio-district provide an essential contribution by mediating economic relationships, provide assistance and technical service to farmers and communicate the importance of sustainable production and local purchase which a single farm would not be able to coordinate. Different types of consumers are valorised and actively participate in the continuous improvement of products, services and production processes.

Economic and Social impacts

An assessment of the socio-economic and environmental impact of the bio-district shows that prospects are very encouraging and that turnover of active participants to the bio-district and related events increased in the last three years by 10% per year. Demand for organic products is growing, and the overall shortening of the supply chain has generated loyal customers, boosting development in the sector, with more and more farms becoming multifunctional and converting to organic production. Bio-district’s producers also reported that selling has never been so easy indicating that the short supply chain is a solid market channel even if the price paid to farmers are comparable to other market outside the bio-district.

At the social level the inclusive approach of the bio-district has positively impacted the social capital of the communities involved. Firstly events, workshops, participations in farmer’s associations and meetings represent opportunities to strengthen social relationships between the actors of the bio-



districts. Those occasions have played a crucial role in linking communities from the coast with those living in the inlands which in turn also attracted tourists to new places. Secondly farmers are recognized to be real ecosystem managers and food provider's thereby enhancing the social role of farmers, their identity and the need to support them through consumption of local food and public procurement. Thirdly the rural communities are now much more empowered in dealing the local authorities and institutions due to the series of consultations and participatory landscape planning approach. Fourth the different associations, cooperatives and the involvement of academia represents an important platforms for knowledge sharing and consultations for farmers. An *Innovation Service Center* has been recently established in collaboration with several Farmer's associations, the Agricultural Research Centre and University of Salerno, to provide technical assistance, support business management, monitor and enhance the short the market outlets.

Despite those achievements the Cilento bio-district is facing different challenges:

- Heavy resilience on voluntary works due to lack of funding;
- Lack of a consistent regulatory framework on organic group certification;
- Attract tourists also in low season;
- Turnover of policy maker at local level can affect the functioning of the bio-district;

Political space

Being the Bio-district Cilento a bottom-up organisational innovation enabling a multi-level territorial governance, it allows that political actors (municipalities, regional), public institutions (national parks) and civil society (associations) are mobilized to transform the area's heritage into resources for innovation and development of rural areas based on organic model. It leads to a continuous improvement of the agro-food production system as demonstrated by the recent launch of the document "*Costruire una strategia condivisa di sviluppo dei territori*" promoted by INNER and Italian Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Agreement "*La carta di Padula*" signed by Legambiente, Osservatorio Europeo del Paesaggio and INNER to promote agroecology inside the Italian Parks and Protected areas with the purpose to reach 100% organic by the year 2020. The Cilento's experience has also served as a basis to the growing number of bio-districts that are spreading across Italy, Europe and Africa. To date there are 27 bio-districts running in Italy spread among 18 regions and other 21 are in the process of being formed in 15 regions. Given the high number of bio-districts in Italy a specific law¹ on bio-districts and organic farming is currently being debated in the Italian parliament.

From Italy the bio-district movement has expanded across Europe and Africa where an additional 10 bio-districts experiences are present in France, Austria, Switzerland, Hungary, Slovak, Portugal, Albania Tunisia, Senegal and Morocco. In order to support and favor exchange between such a variegated communities the International Network of Eco Regions (IN.N.E.R) has been created. The network aims at enhancing system approach to organic production, strengthen multilevel governance policies, coordination and cooperation between biodistricts to reduce hunger and increase the sustainable of agricultural production and to promote project for international development to address the challenges that the global agriculture is facing.

Message from farmer to farmers

"Bio-districts are territories with a positive energy where the organic agriculture becomes a model of integrated territorial development, participated sustainable and fair for the present and a better future for everybody!"

—Message from Salvatore Basile, President IN.N.E.R.

¹ <http://biodistretto.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/leg.17.bo10768.data20170216.com13.pdf>