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**Article**

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## **POLITICAL ACTIONS ORIENTED TO TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT: THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL ROLE OF AGRICULTURE**

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**Abstract**

In the present context of increasing competitiveness, inducted by the globalization process, to avoid being marginalized or given up, Italian socio-economic systems need to think out models of differentiated development on a local level and based on the exploitation of territorial resources. Taking into consideration that 92% of national surface is classified as rural, it is indispensable to think up models of development whose main reference point is agriculture.

Agriculture is the productive activity which more than others set the characteristics of a territory and it takes on both the role of producer of goods and promoter of a socio-cultural and environmental context.

Agriculture is not a separate sector but an entity strictly integrated with the other components of the socio-economic system and thanks to this it is able to play a fundamental role for the territorial development.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the need to organize an adequate political action aimed at endorsing the multifunctional role of agriculture and to underline how agriculture operating in an integrated way with tourism, handcraft and the other territorial activities is strategic to develop and carry out a development model where the territory is the landmark.

**Keywords:** agriculture, multifunctionality, tourism, agricultural policy, development, rural economics.

**JEL Classification:** Q18, O1, O18. O13

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## Introduction

The phenomenon of globalization has led to a becoming and has set a new context of unmanageable competitiveness, that has favoured the development of short term profit – oriented economic systems whose consequence had been the loss of connection with the real value of economy and the accentuation of social inequalities and exploitation phenomena more and more widespread; the crisis of national systems, and the risk of authoritarian tendencies (Toulmin, 1999; Eckel, 2008).

It seems to be evident that in a such situation the exposure to the risk of serious systemic effects can be a possible consequence since if one of the network component has a problem this will involve also the other components and, at the same time, the free competition could become more a mere theoretical assumption than a verifiable reality due to the natural trend of oligopolies to fix the price (Avant, Finnemore and Sell, 2010).

The above-mentioned considerations impose to put the suitability to guarantee generally needs of development, well-being and economic progress of current economic systems up for discussion and the need to develop economic systems based on the *think globally act locally* principle, where serious attention must be paid on the exploitation of the territorial resources as a whole in order to develop differentiated economic systems.

It is obvious that the reorganization of economic systems cannot leave aside an accurate, coordinated and efficient political action able to turn the elements considered weak if seen from a global competitiveness perspective into opportunities, especially in the Countries characterized by peculiar social, economic and territorial contexts as Italy.

The growth target can be achieved appealing to territorial peculiarities that if well organized as a system can turn opportunities open up globalization into local development (Blair and Carroll, 2009).

Such an action, could in a measure stem the ever-growing gap between wealth and poverty by reason of some economic sectors, very important for the economic development of some Countries, loose resources and occasions and their identity too (Pranab, 2006).

Agriculture is an example of this situation, given that following the rigid rules imposed by globalization it is not able to be competitive, losing its main role, involving other economic sectors related to it like tourism, agri-business and homeland security with heavy consequences from an economic, social and environmental point of view (Bardhan, 2006).

In a Country like Italy in which 92% of its area is classified as rural and where agriculture, although concurs for less than 2% to national wealth, is the central component of a complex socio-economic system- the so-called agri-business system- that counts for 15% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it becomes indispensable to organize development systems whose main referential point is the territorial role of agriculture.

### 1. The Italian economic context and the role of agriculture

Italy represents worldwide the image of a Country very rich in cultural, artistic, historical and culinary traditions and, more generally, the image of “quality of life”. This concept could be summarized in a “territorial brand” whose keystone is the beauty, already intrinsic component on international level of luxury products (Calabrò and Vieri, 2015).

The Italian productive system, traditionally based on small and medium size enterprises with strong territorial links, seems to suffer in particular the homologation and competitive rules based on production costs of globalization.

It follows that in the growing competitiveness context enjoined by globalization process, the only chance the Italian socio-economic systems have in order not to be marginalized is to work for development system differentiated on a local level and based on the exploitation of territorial resources as a whole (Dolishniy and Kyfyak, 2006).

Since the beginning of the economic crisis until the end of 2014, Italy lost about 9,3 points of GDP; the industrial production and the national competitiveness decreased to nearly 18% and 22% respectively (OECD, 2015). Household's buying power on average has reduced of 2,4% per year and their real income is estimated to be on a lower level comparing to 1988.

The unemployment rate (12,7% on February 2015), especially for young people, continues to raise and, at the same time, the fiscal pressure (43,5% in 2014). These situations contribute to weaken the domestic demand and then to look more unlikely the economic recovery (INEA, 2014).

In this framework the recent OCSE valuations (2015) don't seem particularly encouraging; according to these valuations, after six years of recession the GDP growth in Italy is expected to be 0,6% in 2015 and 1,3% in 2016: certainly too modest respect to what it would be necessary to give serious thought to a real economic recovery.

In the present economic context, Italy has to give the priority to growth and in order to develop economic systems able to produce widespread wellbeing on a territorial level it cannot give the agriculture contribution up.

In fact, we must remember that the importance of agriculture is far greater than its reduced effect (1%) in order to GDP formation could suggest us.

It is the fulcrum of the agri-business sector that counts for 15% of national wealth and it is the productive activity that more than others shapes the characteristics of the national territory. It is in fact classified as rural for 92%; 77% of it are mountainous or hilly areas and 57% of national territory is destined to agricultural and forestry activities, very important in order to guarantee environmental safeguard. Moreover, 57% of national territory is occupied by agricultural firms (Vieri, 2012a).

It follows that the agriculture has a great influence in almost the entirety of national territory, even where, and in most cases, it doesn't carry out an economy's leading role in order to its development.

It is thus obvious that we must look at agriculture not as a separate sector but as a reality strictly related and integrated with the other socio-economic components of the economic system and it is for this reason that it can have a leading role in the territorial development (Vieri, 2012b).

In order to encourage this evolution developing and carrying out a really innovative political action aimed at supporting the development of territorial systems it is necessary to consider agricultural policy to be integral part of national economic policy and all the actions in support of agriculture need to be planned according to the effective needs of growth of the overall national socio-economic system.

In this perspective, agriculture takes on a strategic centrality in finalizing and carrying out a development system whose reference point is the territory (Pratap, Awadheshh and Harvinder, 2007).

The involvement of agriculture in safeguard and exploitation of territorial peculiarities measures (agriculture and environment; organic agriculture and agro-energy; agriculture and landscape; soil and forestry; quality; exploitation of beauty and territory promotion) becomes the strategic element in economic system of development that follows the custom of globalization without only suffering the consequences (van Ittersum et al., 2008).

For this reason, in our opinion the protection and development of the territorial role of agriculture must be considered a strategic goal of national economic polity instead of being the subject of various and fragmented measures, anyhow never managed taking into consideration an organic planned project as it is happened up to now.

At present, in Italy, the agriculture sector enjoys public support especially from European Union, the State and the Regions (Anderson and Swinnen, 2008).

This support policy is represented for 76,8% by direct money transfer and for the remaining part (23%) by tax breaks , price-related and contribute benefits (INEA, 2014)

Among money transfers, the most relevant quota is made up both by the payments of State benefits granted through the first pillar of the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) and the measures transiting through the Regional Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) (Shucksmith, Kenneth and Roberts, 2005).

Almost irrelevant the role of Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry Policy (3,8%) and of other Central Administrations such as the Ministry of Economic Development (0,3%) and ISA ( Agro-food Development Institute) (0,1%).

The most important tax breaks are social security and contributions (9,8%) followed by fiscal (8.3%) and pricing (subsidies on fuels: 5,5%).

Overall, the consideration we can deduce is a public intervention heavily influenced by European funding which in turn influences Regional funding through the Regional Rural Development Programmes and totally undifferentiated policies mainly of welfare nature, as the different forms of above mentioned incentives are (Webb and Block,2012).

Taking into consideration that the interventions count as a whole about 13,8 billion euro/year (equal to 50% of added value and 27% of national agricultural production) it seems evident that in the light of the negative economic trends involving this sector – we need to consider that in real terms the added value and the agricultural production are lower than 1999- the problem is the effectiveness of spending and it cannot be neglected or eluded.

In this framework, the rethinking of agricultural support system and then the finalizing of a new model of agrarian policy organically integrated in a wider framework of national economic policy as well as clearly aimed at favouring the development of the territorial role of agriculture, becomes an absolute priority that needs to be engaged through an organized set of interventions.

## **2. The objectives of a political action coherent with the need of territorial development and of the enhancement of the multifunctional role of agriculture**

In Italy, the need to carry out a new policy at last coherent with the necessity and potentialities of development, imposes undertaking clear political commitments, in particular:

- identification of the targets to be pursued and on the interests to be defended;
- the definition of tools that must be taken.

In the present context, the aim to be pursued must be the growth that can be carried out through the adoption of systems with strict territorial links whose base is the exploitation of local resources, first of all the resources on which all the relationship among agriculture, environment and the other components of socio-economic system are based.

Just in virtue of this goal and taking into consideration the multifunctional role of agriculture in the territory, we believe that the interests the territorial political ought to pursue can be solely the collective interests.

In this sense, given the inadequate strength and the nature fundamentally helpful of the current measures supporting the agriculture sector, we consider worthwhile clear and not interpretable recognition of the multifunctional role of agriculture in the territory and the importance it has for the purposes of protection of important collective interests (Cairol, et al., 2009).

It follows that the need to provide for actions to guarantee the presence of a lively and dynamic agriculture able to perform at the same time both the productive function and the other several function of territorial (landscape, hydro-geological set-up) and environmental (soil and water defence, biodiversity) safeguarding; of fundamental Rights (food safety) and cultural heritage (food tradition, rural culture and typicality) protection could not be related to the need of follow up a sectional or corporative request, but rather it can be considered a strategic priority of collective interests (Hobbs, Sayre and Gupta, 2008).

In order to start off a policy aimed at the exploitation of territorial identity, some strategic actions must be implemented, aimed at strengthening the role of agriculture both within the supply chain and the territory. In this perspectives, the measures need to be focused on the need to maintain a profitable agricultural presence in the territory, reinforcing the economic organization of. agricultural enterprises and developing the multifunctional and environmental protection role of agriculture (Knickel et al., 2009).

These measures, that would be an expression of specific political actions, in order to become really effective need to be supported by more general measures aimed at going beyond the limits of current political actions and at setting a new operative context.

These horizontal measures would consider the reform of central authority of government bodies, the relaunch of national policies, the admission of youth and the involvement of agriculture in territorial safeguarding and enhancement actions (Frandsen, Gersfelt and Jensen, 2002).

In this way, agricultural firms can work together with other economic sectors in an integrated and synergic function developing territorial brand and industry.

Up to now a concrete and efficient political response to the reduction of agricultural presence is missed, also considering that the prevalent political tendency had been to incentive the smallholding farmer.

Consequently, in order to increase the agricultural presence on the territory, the political action must be oriented on carrying out regulative measures aimed at analyzing and improving the actions of decontrol of rents, unifications and business expansion and fiscal benefits for buying and selling put in practice up to now.

Saying that, we need however to underline that the main problem regarding the use of the soil by factory farms is not related to their dimension in terms of utilised agricultural area (UAS). In fact, one of the main relevant elements is the increase of the relationship between the territorial agricultural area (TAU) and UAS that, in the range from 1961 to 2010 increased from 69,9% to 74,6%; this data shows that the extension of UAS tends to constantly approach the TAU. Linking this data to the reduction of TAU (-34,9%), UAS (-30,6%) and number of farms (-61,9%) observed in the same period, we can draw important conclusions useful for developing and carrying out an incisive political action in order to maintain agricultural activities on the territory.

First of all, it is important to consider that in 1961 the presence of agricultural activities affected the 88,7% of national area instead in 2010 it was 57,1%. During the time, small firms with less opportunities to use the available areas left the market; as consequence, the abandoned areas no more used for agricultural aims have increased determining difficulty in the management of soil preservation and environmental safeguarding.

Another important effect of abandoned soil is the progressively aging of farmers and the low professional status (only 6,3% of Italian farmers have a university degree and 18% have a diploma) (Cersosimo, 2013). We think that this should be one of the principal element managed by incisive political actions.

However, we have to consider that this situation is in part owed to a physiological consequences (agriculture loses importance when economic development makes progress) that, on a territory with peculiarity and vulnerability like the Italian one, it seems however indispensable relaunching and rethinking land policies not only oriented to solve the problem of land use for productive goals but, above all, to improve the multifunctional role of agriculture making it a strategic aim of national economic policy.

From the possibility to count on an active agricultural presence depends benefits of indisputable public interest. That's why a political action aimed at favouring the maintenance of agricultural presence on the territory could not be sectorial but must be included, integrated and coordinated with the general economic policy through some multi-sectorial measures aimed at affecting the main themes of territorial development: infrastructure, the enhancement of human, environmental, cultural and economic resources at the local level.

In order to pursue this aim, it is fundamental to consider an economic re-organization of farms allowing farmers to increase their presence and their bargaining power too. In particular, the re-organization of farms, especially through associative forms, should intervene on the relationship between agriculture and market influencing positively the main variables that contribute to determine the disadvantageous position within agrofood

sector: products substitutability, long chain, low bargaining power and integration with upstream and downstream sectors (Huet and Marcoul, 2006).

In this context, multifunctionality becomes the main tool for farmers to intercept the new demand of goods and services no more linked only to the productive role of agriculture but a demand expressing the innovative idea of multifunctionality that represents an opportunity to develop new entrepreneurial activities aimed at integrating the different economic activities on a territorial level and giving occupational opportunities for young people.

### **3. The multifunctional role of agricultural in the territorial development**

As above mentioned, the development of agricultural productive activities is directed by its nature to the production of results not always recognizable in material assets. In fact, over time the development of agricultural activities has contributed to:

- shape rural landscape;
- maintain human presence in some areas otherwise subjected to decline;
- look after and grow forests;
- determine and preserve social values;
- build knowledge and learning;
- assure provision and food safety;
- exploit human, environmental and economic resources available on a local level;
- qualify and promote the image of local areas increasing their attractiveness and then encouraging their development.

Following the multifunctional approach, agriculture is physiologically able to influence positively lots of the territorial system's components and in this way it can give new income and job opportunities.

Considering agriculture as the key point of a complex system of relationship among the different components of a socio-economic system in the territory is the basis for the definition of a "territorial" strategy in which both the expectation of the Society and those of agriculture, not only referring to what, how much and how to produce, but also taking into consideration the other functions of production of goods (for example the production of energy from renewable sources) and services (agritourism, didactic farm, social activities, etc.) can be converted in development opportunities.

Agriculture is assigned the role of producer of goods but also of promoter of a socio-cultural and environmental context in which the different elements of a territorial reality are tied together in order to create "local economic communities" animated by common objectives of development and able to mutual benefit.

People and their territory are the core of the system and all together they are both the territorial identity and the expression of uniqueness.

Identity is something very liable to be easily and rapidly lost; so on identity great attention need to be posed to avoid being confined in a system that is the expression of standardization where due to the homologation parameters set by globalization competing



become difficult, especially for a Country, as Italy is, where the economic substrate is composed by small and medium size enterprises and where making a success depends more from the quality of the context rather than the context itself.

Territorial identity is the key element to exploit and upon which bases the innovative supply and the possibility to stand out on the market.

We need to consider that what is now considered “environment” is not the representation of nature in its original form but, as said before, the result of the interaction between the pre-existing resources and human activity.

Therefore, it is possible to say that the work men has done during the time has shaped the natural environment making it expression of customs, traditions and operational modality.

It seems inevitable that in order to preserve in the time the “natural” characteristics of the national territory avoiding degeneration phenomena, all the activities that had shaped the territory must be maintained. It follows that the relationship linking agriculture and the wide concept of environment must be well-balanced and not counterposed.

This means that the agricultural models which we want to tend to must be differentiated respect to the exigencies and potentialities locally presented and not extremely intensive and decommitted respect the productive activity.

This is valid that all the areas in which agriculture gets out of its traditional role and assumes the main role as regards all the activities that are able to endorse the multifunctional role. We refer in particular to the role of agriculture in its function of environmental safeguarding and territorial peculiarities promotion by means of the strict connection with the touristic sector too.

#### **4. Agriculture, green economy and soil defence: activities significant for the purpose of social function of multifunctionality**

Agricultural activities significant for the purpose of green economy need to take on the territory and the benefits that can be produced on it as principle reference.

In this sense, the ‘green economy’ model could be considered ground-breaking if it proved to be able to promote a kind of growth identifiable not with the profits of multinationals, but with the need to enhance resources on the various territories (Makower and Pike, 2009).

Only a new relationship between economic growth and environmental resources can favor the creation an objective such as environmental sustainability, which can be effectively achieved only by making choices and keeping a conduct that are highly different according to the characteristics and the potential found at a local level.

Seen the strong bond agriculture has with the territory, its role in developing processes such as that of ‘green economy’ becomes particularly important (Bernstein, Cooper and Classen, 2004). As is known, the role of agriculture is deemed especially important for its contribution to the production of fuel or energy, starting from biomasses obtained as the main-product or by product of agricultural production processes (EC, 2006). It is important to stress that in these cases the production of energy should not be the result of a policy of exploitation of the agricultural resources stemming from an industrial logic, but rather the result of setting agriculture in a proper energy policy framework that fully understands the potentiality of a particular territorial system. In this sense, production of energy from

farming enterprises should not be an alternative to traditional food and main food production activities, but an expression of multifunctional agriculture (Vieri, 2012c). The production of energy should therefore represent one of the functions agriculture can carry out in addition or paired with its main one, not instead of it (Calabrò, 2014). This is in order to guarantee the environmental sustainability of the production processes involved, and therefore maintain agricultural activities in harmony with the socio-economic characteristics and the environmental resources at a territorial level.

Within the social role of agriculture we have to take into consideration the influence it has had in the development of landscape, an asset for which the community didn't incur costs but from which not only the community but also other individuals can draw benefits (capitano, Cioffi and de Stefano, 2011).

We can think, for example to the firms in the services sector that for various reasons (tourism, advertising, food services) can draw benefits from what agriculture produced, is producing and contributes to preserve during the time and, at the same time, to those who take advantage from the role of territorial defence that agricultural activities traditionally are able to carry out.

Despite the importance of the soil has been recognized in national and international political documents, specific measures directed to its safeguard are not carried out yet.

To confirm this, we must consider the political difficulty that, for too long a time, are blocking the approval process of Community Directive on soil protection, letting this task largely at the expense of agriculture is able to do through its activities.

The same is happened under the CAP where both in the first and in the second pillar indirect measures are provided for the soil defense using the conditionality or through measures of rural development.

Supporting agricultural activities aimed at soil protection, hydro-geological assets, and forests safeguarding is very important (MacDonald, et al., 2000). These tools are not only environmental ones but economic, social and cultural too in line with the concept of multifunctional agriculture. It is obvious that a so important problem cannot be left only to the agricultural sector responsibility but it has to be organized within a coordinated action plan where soil defense is organized within a wider context of economic policy.

##### **5. Agriculture and tourism: two drivers to develop an economic system based on beauty and quality**

The creation of a "local communities system" can give to the Italian economy the opportunity to benefit from the integration of two leading economic sectors: agriculture and tourism.

Environmental, artistic, cultural, landscaped values and quality of products (foodstuffs, handicraft, clothing, cars, etc.) put Italy under conditions to be able to escape from homogenizing pressures of globalization developing activities whose competitiveness is not linked to lower production costs.

Tourism represents one of the leading sectors in the national economy but it embodies a strong complexity and heterogeneity that makes necessary an incisive organizational action in order to avoid standardization or depersonalization whose only effect would be the drop

of competitiveness (Hjalager, 2007). In fact, tourism relates with globalization phenomena in contradictory ways: from one side it is believed that tourism can take advantages from globalization, from the other side it seems undeniable that to the concept of globalization we must counterpose the concept of uniqueness given that the importance of the global-local nexus has been underlined many times (Aramberri, 2009). This goes hand in hand with global marketing strategies which rely on the philosophy that “diversity sells” (Salazar, 2005).

In fact, the ensemble of territorial elements such as natural, anthropologic, economic, social and cultural ones characterises unquestionably a touristic area and all together they represent the area where all the economic activities able to enhance or degrade them are put in place. In the national context, this doesn't mean taking into consideration only the variety of landscapes through which over time national agriculture expressed its presence and shaped the territory but the variety and quality characterising Italian agribusiness making it well-known worldwide, that, *de facto*, is becoming an important lure. This is particularly true for Italy, a Country which boasts a large culinary tradition whose foodstuff are famous all over the world and can be used as an integral part of the tourism sector, since they represent an economically viable answer to the problems of inadequate competitiveness and market penetration as well as an important opportunity for the promotion of Italy's environmental and cultural resources. One example of this is the growth of food and wine itineraries for tourists or itineraries linked to local traditions which guarantee the maintenance of local cultural identity, avoiding the degradation of tourism linked with the standardisation and homogenisation of a locality and, at the same time, it represents a tool of development and promotion of productive function of agriculture (Calabrò, Postorino and Lagioia, 2009).

The extraordinary quality and beauty of food products and agricultural landscapes is the result of an hard work and diligence in many cases prolonged and lavished over centuries not just for an ephemeral taste of beauty but with the aim to develop a productive activity which get on that landscapes and products its role and its results.

Moreover, the tradition values, old-fashioned techniques and territorial uniqueness stands for the identity of Italian food traditions not only for the qualitative value but for places of production, knowledge and competence developed around that if well organized represent the keystone for development.

The enhancement of the peculiar characteristics of a territory provides a strong motivation for tourists to visit localities, searching for something unique and specific and coming into contact with different ways of life and thought. Tourism thus takes on the role of privileged instrument of territorial awareness, defence and enhancement.

It is widely recognized that “beauty” attracts people while “ugliness” repulses people. When we discuss about “beauty” we think to what mankind with his activity is able to do: something that can be transformed in positivity not only as philosophic concept but above all as economic concept. If mankind takes care of available resources he produces positive things that can have an economic value attracting new resources that create wealth (Calabrò and Vieri, 2014).

We can assume that beauty and quality are not two dissimilar concepts because both represents the attitude of something to satisfy implicit or expressed needs. These needs express themselves in essential characteristics naturally negotiable and, at the same time, the result of objective and emotional aspects. Quality of tourism depends on how the

peculiar characteristics of a locality strongly encourages tourists to move around various places in search of something unique and specific. Tourism thus takes on a new role as a favoured instrument of promotion, defence and enhancement of a local area.

Looking carefully, we cannot think to create quality without beauty.

It is unquestionable that although the widespread abundance of products and beautiful landscapes, the most appreciated food specialities and the most charming touristic attractions are concentrated in the highest aesthetic value and better preserved areas.

It stands to reason that lowest the attention to safeguard beauty and quality lowest the development opportunity.

### **Conclusions**

There is no doubt that, especially in these last years, the Italian socio economic system has suffered the effect of globalization without fully catching its positive elements such as market opening and the growing demand of quality products from the new riches (Calabrò and Vieri, 2015).

The economic context ask for re-examine and reorganize production systems paying serious attention to the key role of territorial resources and peculiarities, in order to operate on the globalized market without coming off worst.

Territorial characteristics represents, in this context, the historical and cultural heritage of a territory and are the principle elements of “identity” and “uniqueness”.

Italy can work on a global market only creating an economic development system turning around its “identity” that if well organised and supported by incisive and efficient political actions is able to arouse the market interest from homologated goods and services arranged taking into consideration the need to compete on the basis of production costs to goods and services of an high level of quality, expressing territorial peculiarities.

If we share the need to adopt development models different by those used up to now, we agree that a real growth is possible only if it is the result of a development process founded on social inclusion and the creation of well-being widespread on a territorial level.

In this economic system agriculture is the fulcrum of an integrated system together with tourism, handcraft and all the other territorial activities combining territorial needs and development opportunities taking as fixed points the need of affirming and reinforcing values such as health, environmental quality, territorial beauties not naturally negotiable and not subjected to speculative logics.

Only relying upon one’s one diversities and endorsing one’s one professionalisms the Italian socio-economic system can get out of limits imposed by globalization and can compete efficiently in the market.

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