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Article

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Italian Review of Agricultural Economics (REA)

Provided in Cooperation with:

Firenze University Press

Suggested Citation: Marotta, Giuseppe; Nazzaro, Concetta (2023) : Proximity economy and local food chains for the regeneration of inner areas, Italian Review of Agricultural Economics (REA), ISSN 2281-1559, Firenze University Press, Florence, Vol. 78, Iss. 1, pp. 3-15, <https://doi.org/10.36253/rea-14309>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/325648>

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Citation: Giuseppe Marotta, Concetta Nazzaro (2023) Proximity economy and local food chains for the regeneration of inner areas. *Italian Review of Agricultural Economics* 78(1): 3-15. DOI: 10.36253/rea-14309

Received: March 16, 2023

Revised: June 27, 2023

Accepted: June 27, 2023

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Corresponding Editor: Catia Zumpano

Keynote article

Proximity economy and local food chains for the regeneration of inner areas

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Abstract. The ecological transition and food and energy crises have revealed the issue of inner areas which, despite their vulnerabilities, seem to have become strategic in Italy. The renewed attention to inner areas highlights their potential for food and energy production and the need for a multidimensional sustainability approach to address issues of depopulation and resource waste. The paper aims to contribute to the debate on these topics and to stimulate research on territorial analysis and policies, also in virtue of the new awareness of the potential of inner areas, rich in human, cultural, natural and economic resources. To find a solution to the economic and social revitalization of these areas, it is necessary to leave the mainstream of global competition and take different paths, based on the enhancement of local resources and the direct involvement of citizens/consumers through the promotion of a model of “proximity economy”. Within this logic, foods from minor supply chains in fragile areas can become the driver for a proximity economy model based on cooperation, participation, reciprocity, inclusion and the sharing of created value.

Keywords: inner areas, proximity economy, rural development, transformative policies.

JEL codes: Q18, Q19, O18.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- The ecological transition and food and energy crises have brought out the strategic role of inner areas.
- An interpretative analysis of the national territorial dynamics and policies must stimulate a reflection on possible, innovative lines of action in favour of a proximity economy model to regenerate internal areas.
- The proximity economy can represent a perspective for the economic and social revitalization of inner areas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inner areas¹ seem to have suddenly become strategic. The ecological transition and food and energy crises (triggered by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict) need their important contribution. The unsustainable overcrowding of urban areas needs the territories of the inner areas. If inner areas regenerate, life quality improves for everyone, also enhancing the wide heritage of resources they hold (natural, forest, environmental, landscape, historical, cultural, food, etc.).

However inner areas are the most fragile areas of the country, risking economic and social desertification as a result of the widespread decline in human activities and services, as well as the unstoppable and growing phenomenon of depopulation, which takes young people away and leaves behind an aging population increasingly in need of support and assistance, with a welfare system that has also weakened in accordance with an approach strongly oriented towards efficiency and accounting (Barbera *et al.*, 2022; Locatelli *et al.*, 2022).

In 2012, the Minister for Cohesion proposed the National Strategy for Internal Areas (SNAI – Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne), aimed at halting the economic and demographic decline of these realities. This Strategy has been implemented through different initiatives in “pilot areas” in all Italian regions. After an initial phase of enthusiasm and expectations, following the first disappointing results achieved, the attention paid to this policy has decreased, emphasizing its failure (Interlandi and Famiglietti, 2022).

The Ukraine war suddenly brought this issue back to the forefront, at least in the debate among experts, as an apparently incomprehensible paradox was discovered: our country’s threatening external dependence on strategic resources, such as food and energy, which has had very strong economic and social repercussions, against a

widespread and under-utilisation of such resources’ production potential in inner areas. In this sense, the inner areas can make a contribution to lighten the external dependence in the availability of strategic resources.

The Italian government’s choice to attribute to the former Ministry of Agriculture also the competence on “Food Sovereignty”, although not expressly declared, seems to arise from the awareness of the aforementioned paradox. Such a choice, made by a developed country, suggests the awareness of the great productive potential of these areas (in terms of food and energy), marginalized by a territorially unbalanced development model.

This renewed attention to inner areas, within a vision of sustainability, rekindles the debate on a theme of great impact, territorial rebalancing, which is not just a north-south issue, but also concerns the relations between urban, and rural areas of the country. The spotlights are on the emergence of depopulation, the waste of resources, the sustainability of an extractive economic and social model, which has drained resources in some areas (inner areas) concentrating them in others (urban and coastal). As the statistics show, nowadays both areas have problems of unsustainability, due to desertification for inner areas, and excesses of concentration for urban areas (ISTAT, 2021).

This study aims to contribute to the debate on the above-mentioned topics, proposing an interpretative analysis of the national territorial dynamics and policies, in order to stimulate a reflection on the prospects that models of proximity economy can have in the valorisation of local supply chains and markets and in the creation of value in rural territories. But also on the possible contents of a line of action in favour of food sovereignty in our country for concrete initiatives in order to restore a future to territories otherwise condemned to abandonment under the burden of depopulation and economic desertification. The aim is also to stimulate scholars, in particular agricultural economists, to deal with territorial analysis and policies and orient their research paths on critical questions for the future of our country.

With this objective, the paper is organized as follows: after a framework of the dynamics of economic and territorial development, the perspectives of the long-term strategy for rural areas are analysed and a model of the proximity economy for regeneration of inner areas and their real transformative development is proposed.

2. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TERRITORIES

Among the many elements characterizing the dominant economic-social model developed in our country

¹ They are defined as “significantly far from the centers of supply of essential services (i.e. education, health and mobility), rich of important environmental and cultural resources and highly diversified by nature and centuries-old anthropization processes”, *Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne: definizione, obiettivi, strumenti e governance*, 2018. ISTAT, on the other hand, defines as “inner areas” a predominant part of the Italian territory that is characterized by a spatial organization based on “minor centers”, often small towns that can only guarantee residents limited access to essential services. According to ISTAT, the new mapping of inner areas which classifies Italian municipalities as *Pole*, *Belt*, *Intermediate*, *Peripheral* and *Ultrapерipheral*, shows that they are located mostly in the regions of Southern Italy (44.8% of the national total): overall there are 1,718 (67.4%) municipalities that are part of them, especially in Basilicata, Sicily, Molise and Sardinia (all over 70%). More than 13 million people live in Italian inner areas, less than 23% of the population, with a population density of 75.7 inhabitants per sq Km, ISTAT (2022), Focus *La geografia delle aree interne nel 2020: vasti territori tra potenzialità e debolezze*.

since the second world war is the structural tendency to a spatial concentration of economic and social resources, as a result of the asymmetric relationship between urban areas-inner areas, which saw the former in a position of absolute dominance from every point of view and the latter subordinates (Terluin, 2000; Dwyer *et al.*, 2002; Van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2000; Marotta and Piazza, 2021).

Urban areas have historically been places of attraction/concentration of economic activities, population, services and infrastructure. Economic agents considered them as places in proximity to the market, with good availability of services and infrastructure, while for citizens they were places of job opportunities, where personal fulfilment and improvement of life quality were easier.

In contrast, inner areas represented the other side of the coin, the areas where the transfer of human and economic resources originated. A massive exodus that has led to today's delays, characterized by depopulation, an ageing population, rarefaction of economic activities, services and infrastructure, with only one sector that presides over the territory, agriculture, in organizational and business forms divided into a framework of inhomogeneity, where significant productive realities coexist with realities in great difficulty.

Using a simplified interpretative scheme, the urban areas, in the transformative dynamics of the economy and society, have found their initial mechanism of virtuous development, increasingly distancing the other (inner) areas, in a model centred on two fundamental elements: the crowd and speed. The first represented two important reference values:

- *economic value* – the crowd has meant a large market space, significant segments of demand for goods and services that have attracted economic activities and infrastructure, transforming the areas of concentration in places of identity, economic and social vitality;
- *political value* – the crowd was, and remains, also the expression of the breadth of the electoral base, the catalyst of the attention of policymakers and, consequently, the priority destination of policies.

Speed represents the dominant mode of measurement of the lead time required for economic events, the dissemination of knowledge and innovations, social and personal relationships. It is the determinant of the “life cycle” of human activities in every sphere (economic, social, relational, political, religious, etc.), making every human acquisition fluid, unstable and short-lived (Bauman, 2011). It is the driving force that encouraged the continuous regeneration of market demand, contributing to the positive dynamics of the economy and society.

On the other hand, rarefaction and slowness are evident in inner areas as diametrically opposed processes. These territories have been relegated by the capitalist market economy to a role functional to the development model of the most susceptible areas, undergoing a resource draining process that has led to a territorial context of widespread “rarefaction” of economic, social and political processes, resulting in a generalized “slowness” in the evolutionary dynamics of economies and local communities. In this case, rarefaction and slowness have been the determining factors of the delays detected in today's statistics. Such delays will not find solution within the dominant model, which will continue to be inspired by the crowd (market) and speed (new opportunities for growth).

The territorial polarization between concentration and rarefaction, speed and slowness, has been joined by another functional type, concerning the economic and market power between the productive sectors and between the economic agents operating along the supply chains. A process that has led over time to:

- the industrial and service sectors to distance the primary sector significantly in terms of wealth production;
- the downstream sectors of the food supply chains to grab increasing shares of the created value, leaving farms insignificant and decreasing parts, thus making them increasingly fragile and, in less susceptible areas, unlikely to survive.

Progressive agriculture weakening, compared to the rest of the economy, follows a historical trend determined by Engel's law, according to which the share of food expenditure compared to the total consumption is reduced to the increase in income. In other words, as income increases, the non-agricultural sectors receive a relative stimulus from greater and increasing demand over time, compared to that received by agriculture. It is a kind of natural law that sees agriculture losing in the dynamics of economic development. This aspect represents one of the main reasons behind the historically recognized support to this sector in our country and in the European Union (i.e. Common Agricultural Policy).

The asymmetric distribution of value along the food supply chains is explained, instead, by the excessive fragmentation of farms and, consequently, the supply of agricultural commodities, the lack of adequate organizational models of the latter and the low diffusion of contractual models to protect them (Brunori *et al.*, 2016; 2020; Ciliberti *et al.*, 2022; Bonanno *et al.*, 2018). Farms are *price takers* and suffer from the market power of processors and food distributors.

The two mentioned polarization processes, belonging to capitalist development (obviously there are also others, but they are relatively less relevant to the issues addressed here), are the main drivers that have led to the depletion of the inner areas, leaving agriculture in conditions of increasing fragility to be the mainstay of these areas.

After decades of unlimited growth, driven by the intense exploitation of natural resources, where crowds and speed represented the two main sources of value, leading to the domination of urban areas, today those same two sources of growth (crowd and speed) can be counted among the causes of the main factors of unsustainability of the dominant model of economy and society.

The crowd, seen as widely including activities concentration, in fact, represents the root cause of many forms of unsustainability. The growth of waste, food waste, CO₂ emissions, noise pollution, epigenetic diseases, congestion in mobility, the disruption resulting from the imbalance in supply and demand for work in urban contexts, are all factors of crisis due to the pattern of concentration and crowd. In this context of structural perspective changes, speed, powered also by the digital revolution, has made fluidity the dominant category of every relational form (economic, social, personal), generating instability, uncertainty, fears.

The Covid-19 pandemic has given a final blow to this model. The crowd and speed (of the urban-centric system) in the economic model of concentration and unlimited exploitation of resources have created the conditions for the spread of the pandemic. Thus, in a couple of decades, the crowd and the speed, from engines of urban development, have become causes of unsustainability and alienating lifestyles, from which “post-modernity” discomfort and hardships originate.

Such deep changes in the scenario led to new sensitivities among citizens regarding the issues of the environment and its relationship with health, emissions into the atmosphere and climate change, the relationship between food and health, social exclusion, the many and diversified forms of pollution linked to the concentration (crowd), the need for spaces of slow socialization and liveability, etc. In essence, in this phase of “modernity” and “rapid revolution”, the awareness that the crowd and speed are becoming sources of alienation and discomfort and that well-being and quality of life need large and safe spaces, clean natural resources, relational slowness and resilience. This awareness has suddenly flooded with new light the neglected and excluded areas of the old model (the inner areas), which turn from “non-places”, from which to emigrate, into spaces of opportunity, “identity places”, where it becomes possible for territorial communities to build local economies generating

tangible and intangible values (Nazzaro *et al.*, 2021) and “places to live” also through new forms of experiential tourism and/or new residents attracted by a better life quality. In other words, to paraphrase Rossi Doria, the “flesh is fraying” and “the bone is becoming more entrenched”.

Precisely with regard to the fragility of inner areas, the ongoing war in Ukraine has highlighted further paradoxes and risks of the current development model:

- the market crisis, caused by the shortage of various agricultural and agri-food products, which adversely affects the purchasing power of families, already affected by the systemic crisis, seems incomprehensible in the face of large areas of the country (inner areas) kept unproductive due to their poor competitive power in global markets.
- the energy crisis, with strong inflationary pressures, despite large areas of the country (inner areas) with enormous potential, in terms of environmental resources (sun, wind and water) useful for the production of energy from renewable sources (wind, photovoltaic and hydroelectric).

Basically, the logic of profit and efficiency, exacerbated by neoliberalism and globalization, has made territories with significant natural resources uncompetitive, increasing the country's dependence on external sources. This is now posing a serious threat to food sovereignty and democracy, as evidenced by the war in Ukraine. Food sovereignty is a recent topic that has gained international recognition in opposition to the liberalization of food markets under the free-market push of the WTO, following the Marrakech agreement (1994)², which also included the agricultural agreement. The concept of food sovereignty was first introduced during the international conference of the “Via Campesina”³ coalition in Tlaxcala, Mexico, in April 1996, in opposition to the concept of “food security”. The critique of the “Via Campesina” movement is based on the fact that

² The Marrakesh agreement was signed in Marrakesh on April 15, 1994. The agreement marked the birth of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which came into effect on January 1, 1995. The Marrakesh agreement, the final act of the *Uruguay Round*, developed from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and expanded by adding sections relating not only to trade in goods but also to: services; agricultural, textile and health sectors; the strengthening of intellectual property rights; the elimination of barriers to free trade in goods; and the resolution of international disputes.

³ The “Via Campesina” is an international movement founded in 1993, which brings together millions of small and medium-sized farmers, landless people, women farmers, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the world. Its goal is to defend sustainable small-scale agriculture as a way to promote social justice and dignity, in strong opposition to multinational corporations. It includes about 150 local and national organizations in 70 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas, representing 200 million farmers.

«the definition of “food security” (FAO 1996)⁴, by not considering the origin of food, sets up an open model in which the availability of the product is determined by exchange with foreign countries, which has led to the gradual “privatization of food security” in the hands of multinational corporations», dramatically displacing local and national productions in developing and underdeveloped countries. The concept of “food sovereignty” was subsequently adopted and ultimately formulated in the “Nyéléni Declaration” of the International Forum on Food Sovereignty held in Mali in February 2007, which saw the participation of over 500 delegations of peasant movements and civil society organizations from 80 countries.⁵

Food sovereignty – historically born to claim the “food democracy” of local producers, giving “priority to local and national economies and markets” in developing and underdeveloped countries, crippled by food neoliberalism – has become, and is becoming, a priority also in developed countries, where for years underlying economic and social difficulties, due to the structural crisis resulting from the globalization of markets, have exploded with the war in Ukraine, which suddenly highlighted the vulnerabilities of these countries due to dependence on foreign strategic resources such as food and energy. Thus, even in the developed West, failures of the theory of productive specialization and comparative advantages underlying neoliberal policies have been experienced, opening up unprecedented spaces for national policies that are more attentive to reducing dependence on external strategic resources. This change in political and institutional vision reopens perspectives for minor sup-

ply chains⁶ and for agricultural production areas located in inner areas. The revitalization of these territories and supply chains can, in fact, contribute to securing the country’s strategic resources and, at the same time, reconsider the economic development model, as mentioned before, towards a substantial polycentric territorial rebalancing (between urban and inner areas).

In the light of these scenarios and, above all, of this latest recently implemented institutional change, it appears possible today to undertake paths to promote new models of development in inner areas, oriented towards food sovereignty and democracy, transformative regeneration of local communities and local food chains and markets. In this regard, one possible option could be explored by implementing models of proximity economy and experiential tourism, which will be discussed later. An option through which it is possible to enhance the great heritage of food, natural and landscape resources present in inner areas, which represent the conditions for ensuring a better quality of life for local populations, but also for urban ones, to the extent that significant contributions for the effectiveness of ecological transition can come from these areas.

The aforementioned changes are leading to an increased awareness that inner areas and their minor supply chains can become strategic resources for the country, capable of providing effective responses to the new demands of citizens regarding quality of life, food security and, more generally, sustainability and individual and social well-being. They are able to deliver productions that loosen the grip of external dependence on strategic products which, as precarious geopolitical balances have shown, can have serious repercussions on national economies in the case of war.

3. A NEW MID-LONG-TERM VISION OF INNER AREAS

The explosion in demand for quality of life in urban areas can find its answers in the inner areas. A change of perspective in territorial relations, which can be defined as epochal, however, as we will see later, represents a potential path that requires significant choices, political will, participation, and, above all, a substantial change in territorial development policies. An interpretive analysis follows of the main dynamics that have affected inner areas in recent decades, which frame the main topic of this study, namely the regeneration of minor supply chains and inner areas.

⁴ “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 1996).

⁵ “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to nutritious and culturally appropriate food that is accessible, produced sustainably and ecologically, and the right to decide on their own food and agricultural systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, above the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and integration of future generations. It offers us a strategy to resist and dismantle neoliberal trade and the current food regime. It provides guidance for food, agricultural, pastoral and fisheries systems to be managed by local producers. Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets, favors traditional family farming, fishing, and animal husbandry, as well as the production, distribution, and consumption of environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable foods. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that can guarantee a decent income for all peoples and the right for consumers to control their own food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights of access and management of our lands, territories, water, seeds, livestock, and biodiversity are in the hands of those who produce the food. Food sovereignty implies new social relationships free from oppressions and inequalities among men and women, peoples, races, social classes, and generations. (...)” (Food Sovereignty Forum, 2007).

⁶ The minor supply chains referred to, are poorly structured, in which mainly only the agricultural phase is developed.

When referring to inner areas and agriculture, it should be noted that we are not referring to homogeneous territorial realities and agricultures. Each agricultural system (agri-food supply chain) is distinguished by its own specificities, which are biunivocally connected to the reference territories, each of which expresses its own potentialities. Therefore, it is necessary to be aware of the presence of “plurality of rurality and agricultures” or a mosaic characterized by the coexistence of many different rural areas, agricultures, farms, supply chains and different organizational models, where diversity means different criticalities and potentialities. In essence, we are facing a sort of “economic, social, and organizational biodiversity” within which there are:

- *developed rural areas*, that boast successful and prestigious supply chains, in which farms and other economic agents operate with good market positioning and local institutions that are very sensitive to food supply chain dynamics;
- *intermediate rural areas*, consisting of irrigated plains that produce commodities under competitive conditions and with local institutions that are somewhat aware and attentive;
- *rural areas with significant structural constraints* (i.e. depopulation, aging, etc.) in which we find so-called minor supply chains, that is, poorly structured supply chains, mainly engaged in traditional crops and livestock farming, with limited competitive positioning on regional, national and global markets.

In short, a positive correlation emerges, with ample empirical evidence, between the strength of territories in terms of productive and organizational potential, the quality of institutions⁷, and the good competitive positioning of farms and agri-food supply chains (Hirschman, 1981; Raimondo *et al.*, 2020).

Inner areas fall within the third type of rural territories defined above. These are realities with strong structural constraints, weak institutions and the presence of minor supply chains that strenuously resist the risk of abandonment. However, in these inner areas, food supply chains play an extremely important role as territorial presidiums, as a testimony of local traditions and cultures, as guardians of the landscape and biodiversity. And today, the ongoing war strongly emphasizes their lack of productive contribution to the national market, which could have alleviated the market crisis we

are experiencing. The productive capacity of minor supply chains, if supported and organized, could have significantly compensated for external dependence, avoiding productivity temptations (increasing yields in the usually already overexploited areas) that would end up aggravating sustainability problems, loss of biodiversity and climate change.

The transformative regeneration of the more inner areas and the economic revival of minor supply chains represent a challenge that must be necessarily won if we really want to contribute to the maintenance of biodiversity and mitigation of climate change, and at the same time, to the strengthening of food security in terms of less dependence on the outside. An obligatory path that, moreover, would also open up concrete prospects in the direction of a change in the economic and social paradigm towards more inclusive and fair forms that put people and territories at the centre.

Today, inner areas have all the characteristics to respond to the new demands of society (Marotta and Nazzaro, 2020; Pinto *et al.*, 2020; Pollermann *et al.*, 2020; Storti *et al.*, 2020). There have been many socio-economic transformations that have affected agriculture, including in these areas, as an attempt to recover spaces of “resistance” in a competitive arena that excludes areas with “structural fragility”. Despite being “fragile”, internal agriculture is nonetheless interpreting modernity by following interesting lines of evolution:

- *product diversification*, opening up the farm to new activities related to the primary one, such as agri-tourism, processing and direct sales, which bring urban citizens closer to the world and traditions of farming, to the cultural matrix that underlies our modernity;
- *product differentiation*, towards a significant strengthening of the link between products and their production territories (Identity Products); products that incorporate cultures, traditions and informal knowledge specific to their places of origin, towards which citizens are increasingly attentive, sometimes as destinations for new forms of tourism;
- *agriculture multifunctionality*, linked to extensive production models that generate positive externalities such as a healthy environment, clean natural resources, scenic beauty, protection of biodiversity, social inclusion, etc. A set of “public goods” characterizing the new agriculture, greatly appreciated by citizens but not adequately recognized by the market, and thus supported by the Common Agricultural Policy (through the direct payments instrument), (Cecchi and 2003; Van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2002; Van Huylenbroeck *et al.*, 2003; Marotta and Nazzaro, 2020).

⁷ The issue of institutional deficit, both qualitative and quantitative, has led, according to Hirschman's studies since the 1970s, to unifying analytical tools and policies applied to different territorial and productive realities in terms of development dynamics, with the consequent dissatisfaction of citizens and communities, expressed through participatory criticism or radical detachment.

These evolutionary lines have not been homogeneous in terms of intensity and content, but in any case, thanks to them, some inner areas have turned from places of (only) production to (also) spaces of consumption and enjoyment, offering goods and services capable of satisfying the growing demand for well-being and quality of life of citizens, especially urban ones (Marotta and Nazzaro, 2011). These are contained realities, not generalized, but they represent models to be followed in order to regenerate and revitalize all the internal realities of our country.

Therefore, the transformations mentioned have revealed a new perspective that can open up interesting paths of territorial regeneration and social innovation, in response to new citizen sensitivities and demands. To make this perspective concrete, a reorientation and better targeting of territorial policies is necessary.

In our country there's a strategic line which assigns inner areas development to the EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development), while entrusting the much richer ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) and ESF (European Social Fund) with the responsibility of acting predominantly in favour of the development of urban areas, that is, places with a large population and electoral base. Therefore, since the EAFRD cannot intervene in the development and improvement of contextual conditions (i.e. establishment and strengthening of the non-agricultural productive fabric, infrastructure of the territory, provision of services to people and businesses, strengthening of social capital and capacity building, etc.), general economic policies that should have filled the gaps in inner areas have been very scarce and ineffective. The inner areas issue has been always seen as almost exclusively within the scope of rural development policy, without taking into account that this policy has tools that allow it to act only on the agricultural sphere and related territorial aspects, but not on contextual variables.

This has been a blinkered view that has exclusively favoured the crowd, leaving the structural constraints of these areas unresolved, which, moreover, as previously stated, were caused precisely by the urban-centric logic pursued since the 1950s. Thus, nowadays there's a model in structural crisis (the model of crowd and speed) that cannot be rebalanced and compensated for by other territorial model positive dynamics (the model of rarefaction and slowness), as these have been left without strategic contextual policies. In this policy inconsistency, we find the reasons why we still talk about potential, vision and medium-to-long-term prospects today, while reiterating that there are now quite significant cases at the national level, where such visions are beginning to take

concrete form autonomously from the bottom up (Bours *et al.*, 2022).

The concentration/territorial polarization of development seems, therefore, no longer viable and, since no investment has been made in areas other than urban ones, the prospects appear critical. It is no longer possible to continue pursuing a model that concentrates resources and policies in areas where the main constraint to development is represented by congestion. It is necessary to decongest such areas by shifting attention and policies to areas of rarefaction. In other words, it is necessary to overcome the "concentration model" in favour of a "distributed model" from polarization to polycentrism.

This is a medium-to-long-term political-cultural revolution, which can no longer be postponed. A policy that retraces, at least partially in reverse, the processes of exodus of the last seventy years, by moving economic activities, services, infrastructure and population from areas of crowd to those of rarefaction, in order to decongest the former, leading them towards a better quality of life, and to strengthen the latter, transforming potential into concrete development actions. A polycentric model that brings benefits to both territorial realities.

In 2012, under pressure from the European Union, the focus on the criticalities and constraints of inner areas in our country increased, leading to the launch of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), with the aim of curbing depopulation. In the light of its already several years of implementation, such a policy is not very effective. SNAI aims to resolve the lack of essential services (school, health and mobility) in advance and at the same time to launch local development plans. To date, only a few selected areas have seen the start of cooperation between municipalities to address the shortage of services, while the line of action relating to development plans remains poorly explored. The inadequacy of this policy lies in the fact that it considers only the lack of essential services as the cause of depopulation, and not also, and perhaps above all, the lack of opportunities for qualified employment. Furthermore, it is being experimented with in only a sample of territories, when the critical issues are widespread in many national inner areas, which are expanding over the years, as shown by some recent reports⁸. Young people leave mainly in search of work

⁸ At the end of January 2023, the "Report on the Inner Areas – focus on the provinces of Avellino and Benevento" was presented by Confindustria Campania – Piccola Industria, in collaboration with the University of Sannio, which reported a demographic decline of around 40,000 people over five years and about 12,000 in the last year, as a result of a marked worsening of both migratory and natural balances. It is very likely that this level of depopulation is common to several other national contexts.

commensurate with the skills and expectations acquired through their degrees, to which the issue of service shortages is also associated. Therefore, to change the future of inner areas it is necessary to substantially reverse the course through a holistic approach to development that, starting from the wealth of natural and food capital, implements paths of social innovation oriented towards ecological transition; paths of circular economy and transformative regeneration of local economies, also oriented towards community welfare, in order to create jobs and therefore retain young people in the area.

The vision for inner areas presented here has also recently been relaunched by the European Union. In June 2021, it published a communication entitled “A long-term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040”. It is a guideline document that outlines the key actions to be taken in order to revitalize the development of rural areas, supporting them in addressing the major global challenges of our time, such as sustainability, climate change, economic and social disparities, food sustainability, etc. Among other things, the EC Communication strongly emphasizes the model of neo-endogenous, “place-based” development (Community Led Local Development (CLLD)), aimed at strengthening the integrated bottom-up development of rural areas (Saracu *et al.*, 2019; Pollermann *et al.*, 2020).

In recent years, institutional attention to the development of fragile areas has increased, also due to the structural economic crises that have occurred. Alongside this, there has been a scientific debate that frames the territorial development delays, and therefore the inner areas, within the broader context of the systemic crisis of the economy and society (Carrosio *et al.*, 2017; Carrosio, 2019; Lucatelli, 2015; Pinto *et al.*, 2020; Marotta and Piazza, 2021). This renewed awareness suggests that the discussion on overcoming the crisis cannot ignore the territorial reading of development dynamics. In other words, the necessary transition to a new model of economy and society cannot be addressed only from a vertical perspective, connected to different sectors of the economy and/or canonical social areas, but must be framed in a territorial perspective, including all those spatial realities that are currently excluded in a new vision of development. Otherwise, there is a risk of changing the model (to an ecological-digital one) but not solving some of the historical problems of our country, such as inequalities and territorial disparities that would continue to characterize economic, social, environmental and territorial dynamics as unsustainable.

With this awareness, the next section presents a development path for inner areas and minor supply

chains, called “proximity economy and experiential tourism”, consistent with the EU’s *Long-term vision* and the UN’s 2030 Agenda.

4. ECONOMY OF PROXIMITY AND INNER AREAS’ TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESSES

As previously mentioned, it is necessary to push for a cultural and political transformation. The focus of this change is represented by the awareness of the problems and a modern and sustainable vision of politics, understood as action in the service of society and territories. Today, the conditions for a change of vision such as the one just mentioned all seem to be there. The sensitivity of citizens to development issues has grown significantly and a critical and responsible awareness has matured, so the prospect of being able to change scenarios no longer seems like a utopia.

The first awareness is that the inner areas today represent an extraordinary heritage of human, cultural, natural and economic resources and can contribute significantly to the solution of the many problems posed by the great challenges of our times. But these contributions can only be realized if we manage to reverse the trends in these areas, triggering transformative and regenerative processes that aim at a human, economic, social and institutional revitalization. The central issue then is to understand – while following the guidelines of the EU “vision” – what is the most effective path to undertake to make transformative and regenerative processes truly concrete and effective, especially in the most fragile territories where minor supply chains operate and do not have a *chance* in the markets of global competition.

The theoretical and political-economic mainstream has led to a “conventional agri-food model”, based on individual and/or supply chain innovation, functional to achieving competitive positions on markets by enterprises, supply chains and territories. Consistent with this model, several territorial realities, characterized by productive excellences and adequate economic and organizational structures, have had, and continue to have, success on national and international markets. However, alongside such competitive and successful areas, as previously mentioned and as confirmed by the socio-economic indicators generally used for territorial analyses, there is also another wide rural world that, in the “global-local” opposition, is significantly disadvantaged, experiencing economic setbacks associated with a constant erosion of its most valuable resource: human capital. For this area of rurality, albeit in a framework of systematic diversity, there is a substantial exclusion from positive

development dynamics. Dynamics that, moreover, the more recent evolution of the economic model (globalization) has made “non-territorial”, transforming areas that were once places of wealth production and development of social and economic relationships into “non-places” that young people do not want and cannot inhabit.

In such a rurality, which is rich in resources but losing out economically and politically, the majority of inner areas are found where minor food supply chains survive, those that do not have the typical conditions to compete on national and global markets (economies of scale, productive/organizational efficiency, market power, etc.). The “conventional mainstream model” is not applicable in these fragile territorial realities because the objective and subjective preconditions for its implementation are lacking (company structure, organizational model, contextual conditions, human capital, etc.). To find a solution for the economic and social revitalization of these areas and supply chains, the mainstream of global competition must be left and different paths followed based on the development of local resources and models of direct citizen/consumer involvement.

An important contribution in this regard comes from scientific research, which proposes alternative new models based on social innovation. Such models are functional to a re-territorialization of development that is transformative and regenerative of territorial ecosystems, oriented towards rebuilding “places” where it is nice to live, work and be happy. Places that also become market spaces, in which all actors, including those who operate on the demand side (citizens/consumers), live an experiential involvement that creates value.

In the scientific literature, in the agri-food field, Marotta *et al.* (2020) proposed the model of the “portfolio of values”, which interprets the short supply chain as an experiential involvement of producers and citizens in the enjoyment of the (material and immaterial) values of rurality. The authors define the “territorial portfolio of values” as “the set of material and immaterial value chains, representative of territorial identity that local actors organize and make accessible to citizen-consumers, through an experiential involvement that creates shared value”.

In the economic-territorial literature, Jeannerat and Crevoisier (2010) propose a model called “territorial stage setting” as an organizational model of actors, objectives and activities that contribute to transforming productive resources into a *particular representation/configuration of experiential activity*, and consumer resources into an experiential involvement that generates value.

In both models, reference is made to the concept of the experiential market, understood as a mode of pur-

chase and/or consumption conceived as an experience lived in the places of production of goods and/or services. In other words, the conceptualization of the experiential market theorizes territorial development not only through the local organization of production, but also through the contextual local organization of purchase/consumption.

The proximity economy is inspired by the above models and, in particular, by the concept of territory as a contextual space of production and purchase/consumption. In fact, the proximity economy refers to an organization of production aimed at selling its products and services to the citizens of its own territory and that closest to it and, simultaneously, a demand for these products expressed by the local and closest communities. For food this means that producers organize themselves to sell in the same production territories and in those closest to them, and local communities purchase and consume food from their own territory and/or that closest to it (the reference can be to a homogeneous territorial area, a province, a region). This concept is often expressed as the “re-territorialization” of food.

On the supply side, producers organize themselves individually, practicing sales formulas through their own sales points, and/or collectively, participating in so-called farmers’ markets. Both forms of direct sales are already widespread in all Italian regions, although they have not always been successful. Now is the time to propose new formulas based on models of social innovation, such as the creation of collective entities by local producers for the management of permanent and exclusive points of sale of local foods, which could be defined as “Small Organized Distribution of Local Food”. This would be located in smaller centres (rural villages) or in medium-small towns that are rebuilding new functional ties with the surrounding countryside, or in peri-urban areas, and once consolidated as a model of food supply, could find their economic, social and cultural function even in the provincial and regional capitals, or in larger cities.

Essentially, the creation of a collective organizational model represents a further step in rationalizing and consolidating “local food systems”, involving all stages related to food, from production to commercial valorisation. The citizens/consumers in a given geographical area can find all the agricultural products and minor supply chains of the reference territory. These are products that do not have the competitive strength to face the challenges of global markets; products obtained through extensive, sustainable and inclusive production techniques, thanks to minor supply chains that resist in their activities, safeguarding fragile territories.

⁹ Cfr. Article 13 of the Unified Text on Agriculture, Legislative Decree of May 18, 2001, no. 228, refers to “Food Districts.”

These products are both representative and connectors of natural, anthropic and cultural ecosystems, towards which citizens express growing interest both to practice a healthy diet and contribute with their consumption/purchase to supporting the development of fragile territories that play important roles for the overall sustainability of the system. They incorporate local cultures and traditions, constituting real ambassadors of the reference territory, with a strong potential as tourist attractions.

The tourist option is the other important opportunity linked to the valorisation of local food in a logic of proximity economy. Making local food known and promoting it in the territories closest to the places of production ends up stimulating the wide latent demand for rurality and bringing citizens, as tourists, to the places of origin of the food. Obviously, the reference is not to generic and/or mass tourism, but to specific segments, fuelled by citizens with particular sensitivity towards natural ecosystems, local traditions and cultures, local products, slow lifestyles and relationships, historical-cultural heritage of rural villages, landscape and biodiversity, shaped by minor supply chains that resist as the only custodians of fragile territories. It is a cultured tourism, sensitive to sustainability issues, seeking an authentic experience through the consumption and purchase of food that has a story to tell, which is the expression of a set of material and immaterial values; a purchase/consumption experience for which there is full availability to recognize its market value. This gives satisfaction to producers who see a *premium price* recognized for their food, and to tourists who experience moments of authentic relationships in healthy natural environments, savouring sensations of well-being and cultural enrichment.

Territories undertaking the path of proximity food and experiential tourism must first organize production, but also the reception of tourists who will be attracted by the offer of experiential moments related to local food. In this context all actors in the territory are called to be protagonists: agricultural producers, artisans, operators in the restaurant and hospitality industry and local institutions. The entire local community becomes a food community, organized to offer citizens an experiential involvement that creates shared value. Local and proximity food becomes the common thread of a territorial organization, of a generative and transformative social innovation that sees production agents, citizens, local institutions and tourists as protagonists in the same territory (see Legge 1 dicembre 2015, n. 194, “Disposizioni per la tutela e la valorizzazione della biodiversità di interesse agricolo e alimentare”).

In this model, the territory is as a sort of “stage” on which the offer of local food and other resources is rep-

resented and on which different actors (producers, communities and non-resident citizens) act (perform) together, collaborating and experiencing experiential involvement that generates shared value. It is a “territorial stage setting” (Jennerat and Crevoisier, 2010) that becomes social innovation, organizational model and, at the same time, the driving force of a transformative regeneration of the territorial ecosystem, of the local community and the minor food supply chains. Such supply chains could never have the strength, even if supported by policy, to compete in global markets, but on their own territorial stage, they can play a leading role without the threat of global competition. The culture and knowledge embodied in the local food of minor food supply chains become like a protective belt compared to global, standardized, a-territorial food that has no story to tell. In a logic of proximity market, the food from minor supply chains in fragile areas can become the *driver* of local development based on cooperation, participation, reciprocity, inclusion and sharing of created value. This development involves local producers, the entire local community and tourists, in an alternative model to the competitive mainstream, based on social innovation that implements the principles of civil economy to promote a food that can be defined as *civil food* (Di Iacovo *et al.*, 2014; Di Iacovo *et al.*, 2017).

The proposed model of proximity economy cannot be applied in all inner areas that suffer from economic and social fragility. Its applicability requires certain minimum conditions, such as the presence of semi-structured productive supply chains (minor supply chains) that have strong historical territorial roots, the presence of artisanal activities, natural capital and local public institutions (local authorities) and private ones (cultural associations, third sector, etc.) sensitive to local development issues. It is necessary that there are minimum prerequisites to stimulate, also through targeted policies, a local social capital capable of implementing the necessary social innovation for the success of a model of civil proximity food.

The scenario outlined for the development of minor food supply chains in fragile inner areas requires targeted policy support and a collective bottom-up approach (Community Led Local Development (CLLD)), as defined in the EU’s *Long-term Vision*. This approach is promoted by Rural Development Programmes (RDP) both in support of Local Action Groups (LEADER approach) and in the context of cooperation measures (Measure 16). Both instruments (Leader and Measure 16) require innovative implementation compared to the previous programming period (2014-2020), including in terms of types of eligible actions, in order to meet the

potential demand for policy and provide concrete development prospects for inner areas. This should be done with the awareness that their underdevelopment, as has been repeatedly mentioned, does not help achieve the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals and denies access to fundamental rights to resistant local communities.

Providing solutions for minor supply chains in fragile territories is the most important challenge for Italian regions in the current phase of rural development programming and EU structural funds. This means having a greater and full awareness of the needs of these areas and, above all, recognizing that their satisfaction cannot be achieved by following traditional intervention logic but requires effective collective approaches, significant social innovation and the decisive contribution of context policies (ERDF and ESF).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of territorial imbalances, among urban and inner areas, conducted in this study showed an incomprehensible paradox of Italian development. For decades urban-centric policies have been implemented, draining substantial resources from inner areas, causing a double unsustainability: urban areas suffer from excess concentration and overcrowding, while inner areas suffer from economic and social rarefaction. The former live at fast paces with homogenized and alienating behaviour styles and significant waste of strategic resources and unsatisfactory quality of life levels; the latter hold underutilized strategic resource assets and environmental conditions that would allow a better quality of life, but few people are benefiting from them.

The flow of resources from inner to urban areas is continuing and has even assumed considerable dimensions. This will dangerously accentuate imbalances, further worsening conditions in both the starting and destination territories. The SNAI, as implemented, does not seem to have produced effective results, while interventions for development under the economic policy context have been scarce. Development action is left exclusively under the domain of policies in the EAFRD field (agriculture and rural development policy); while policies for the much better equipped (in terms of resources and tools) ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) and ESF (European Social Fund) are very scarce.

The situation is unlikely to evolve without a substantial cultural and political change, with the definition of policies with new contents, capable of regenerating local communities through the involvement of all economic, social and institutional actors in a holistic, col-

lective and socially innovative development approach oriented towards horizontal subsidiarity. A neo-endogenous development model, “place-based” (Community Led Local Development (CLLD)) aimed at strengthening integrated bottom up development of inner areas, accompanied by significant technical assistance intervention by the Regions, to fill the deficits of local institutions, which are called to a role of innovative protagonist, without having the necessary human resources, skills and organization, will not produce lasting results.

Regarding policy contents, it is evident that these cannot ignore context characteristics, but in a differentiated way, depending on local vocations, they must still revolve around an integrated model that brings together the susceptibilities of agriculture, craftsmanship, tourism and natural resources. In the study, the model of proximity economy and experiential tourism was explored. Other models can be proposed, starting from the integration of knowledge from a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspective.

The proximity economy and experiential tourism model proposed in this paper represents an important social innovation for inner areas where, as is known, the individual approach to development policies still prevails. In view also of the thrust of the “Long-term vision for rural areas” towards integrated development policies, the implementation of this model could be realized through the LEADER initiative (Cf. CAP Strategic Plan, SRG07- Cooperation for local development and smart villages, areas of reference cooperation for local food systems, local supply chains and markets and cooperation for rural tourism), alongside an intervention of territorial technical assistance to fill the deficit of social and institutional capital in the inner areas. A second line of action could be a national one, within a wider relaunch of SNAI¹⁰.

Food sovereignty can become an important tool to define and implement specific and targeted policies towards an effective enhancement of inner areas’ production systems and to give substance to the proposals formulated here; specific policies such as, for example, “minor supply chain contracts” and policies to promote proximity economy models in all national internal areas.

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¹⁰ See Special Committee of the Parliament; Special Committee on Internal Areas in the Regional Councils of Campania and Tuscany.

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