

# Territorial identity as a strategic resource for the development of rural areas\*

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## 1. *An international project*

European rural areas are the result of thousands of years of historical processes that have given rise to a cultural heritage of inestimable value, which finds expression in a myriad of sensitive landscapes, which are different from place to place. The ever-increasing spread of the built environment has made rural areas more and more important, so that with over 171 million hectares of utilized agricultural area (EU-27) and some 14 million farmers (European Union, 2012) they also play a fundamental role in the protection of soils and biodiversity. Since the early 90s, in fact, the measures of the “second pillar” of the Common Agricultural Policy consider farmers, especially in marginal areas, as key social actors in the protection of the environment, landscapes and cultural traditions (European Commission, 2011; OECD, 2011). The decision-making processes that see local communities as protagonists (“Leader approach”) in the definition of rural development projects suited to local characteristics, (Bryant, Grillotti Di Giacomo, 2007), and the clear identification of development needs in RDP (Rural Development Programmes) territories are among the main goals of rural development policy for the 2014-2020 period (ENRD, 2013).

Following the shift towards post-structuralism, geography, like all the other social disciplines, has profoundly changed the way it conceives rural spaces, giving pride of place to the concept of *agency*, in other words no longer focusing its attention on the material outcomes of rural practices (landscape configuration, land uses, agricultural products, etc.) but on the social processes which construct rural spaces in a dynamic, heterogeneous and relational sense, in the wake of the profound redefinition of the notion of ‘space’ *tout court*, without adjectives, which is now considered to be the product of the relationships between spatial processes and social processes (Massey, 2005; Murdoch, 2006). As for rural spaces, attention has been paid to the collective

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or relational agency between the human and the non-human (Cloke, Marsden, Mooney, 2006), as well as to the relationship between different rural social groups, between rural activities and natural dynamics (such as global warming), and to the redefinition of rural social identities, showing a growing interest in the ways in which the rural and rural identities are performed and enacted by different actors (Woods, 2010).

The issue of territorial identity, however, is considered from a different perspective: in this case the focus is on the relationships between local collectivities and the territories where they live/act, according to a theoretical approach derived from a territorialist matrix (Turco, 2010). This objective is far more appropriate, considering that the territorial planning based on local and participatory logic, as it is currently conceived and supported by European policies, does not come from nothing, but needs time to mature and fertile ground on which to thrive. Therefore local communities need to define the identity of the territories in which they reside or rather, local communities need to decide local specifics and share projects related to the management and the enhancement of the spaces in which they live and act.

Territorial identity, conceived as such, is not an attribute of each territory that has some cultural, productive or landscape features; even less so does it concern alleged essential qualities, and inherent static features. Rather than a product, an outcome or an initial condition, territorial identity is first and foremost a long-term goal, or rather, a dynamic, open and participatory social process, through which local communities – regardless of ethnic, cultural or social differences – choose the hallmarks that they believe characterize the territory where they live/act, in view of a shared project, based on local knowledge, skills and resources.

In this sense, the construction of territorial identity creates fertile ground for the implementation of an ‘active territoriality’, as defined by Dematteis and Governa (2005), because it activates synergies between social components, allows the inhabitants to take care of their territory and is directed towards a self-sustainable project, which allows local communities to inhabit their territory in a conscious, responsible and participatory way (Magnaghi, 1994; 2005).

The ‘Territorial Identity’ Research Group, created in 2008 within A.Ge.I. (the Italian Association of Geographers), addressed the link between territorial identity and local development in a broader spectrum of research, working both on the complex theoretical and methodological issues that the concept of identity brings with it, and on concrete case studies, which also dealt with rural areas (Banini, 2009; 2011; 2013)<sup>1</sup>.

With the intention of holding an international dialogue on the thoughts raised by the above-mentioned research group, the 32nd Session of the Fourth EUGEO Congress (Rome, 5-7 September 2013), entitled “Rural

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<sup>1</sup> For a critical commentary on the rich bibliography related to territorial identity and the concepts parallel to it, please refer to the contributions contained in those volumes.

development policy and local identities in the European Union”, was organized by the authors of this paper, with the aim of opening a debate on the role of the rural development policy of the European Union in promoting the enhancement of local identities, especially those in problem areas, evaluating the effects that these policies have had in strengthening these identities and making them a driving force for effective territorial development. The session was attended by researchers from different European countries, which prompted a fruitful exchange of views, and which led to the contributions collected in the special issue of this journal.

Before highlighting the threads that unite these contributions, the problems that they invoke, and the experiences that they vouch for, we introduce the issues surrounding rural development, when it is considered as both the outcome of and the stimulus to territorial identity.

## *2. Territorial identity and rural development*

Predominantly rural areas account for 57% in Europe (Società Geografica Italiana, 2012). This would be sufficient to explain why the development of rural areas in Europe has a strategic role in the development of the whole European economy. And yet, the importance of rural areas does not come only from their population size, but also from the undoubted potential of these territories, as largely demonstrated by the history of Italian districts that found their competitive basis in this kind of local milieu (Becattini, 2000).

And so “rural areas”, until recently considered as marginal, depressed areas, that could not keep up with the concurrent evolutionary dynamics of urban territories, are now revisited as places for a “sustainable revival” where, by reinterpreting tangible and intangible territorial assets in an innovative way and by leveraging social cohesion and environmental sustainability which are in theory typical of these areas, it is possible to promote an alternative development model with respect to the urban one. Hence, the need for a territorial development which is focused on the enhancement of endogenous potential and which is based on mechanisms of an enlarged governance valuing social cohesion and ensuring processes of strategic convergence among local actors, so as to put place “into action” and direct it at sustainable development.

The social glue which favors cohesion and thus makes mechanisms of strategic convergence among actors and local community’s active participation possible, can only be identified in territorial identity. If territory can be regarded as that portion of the geographical space that a community perceives and represents as its own, living it as a “relational space” and constantly reproducing it through its individual and collective acting (Pollice, 2005), then territorial identity takes a performative role towards territory itself. It is not only the result of territorialization processes, but it is also and above all their prerequisite. It is by relying on identity that a community can promote an endogenous and self-centered development – such as the ones described in the following papers –, and that strategic reorientation processes of rural areas

can be implemented, as stated by the European Union, which identifies them as an essential condition for the development of those areas. We strongly believe that territorial identity is a capital asset with a strategic importance for the development of rural areas. EU rural development policies were successful if, in addition to the worthy initiatives of material and immaterial infrastructure for rural areas, to the promotion of local consultation and the development of productive investments, they managed to reactivate the territorialization processes by focusing on the strengthening of territorial identity, which is an essential component of local development processes. As I wrote, the territory can be regarded as that portion of geographical space that local community perceive and represent as own space and lives like a “relational space” constantly reproducing it by individual and collective actions; The territory’s specificity – regarded as the difference from the geographic surroundings – comes from the process of interaction between this community and the environment (Pollice, 2005; 2012a e b).

Between territorial identity and development there is a relationship of reciprocity and interdependence. This interaction, though taking very different form and intensity, can be either direct or indirect. A strong local identity, for instance, tends to sustain the process of accumulation of social capital, which is one of the main intangible resources underlying local development. Similarly, the sense of belonging contributes to local actors’ embeddedness, preventing delocalization and fostering mechanisms for collaborative competition which are similar to those occurring in the local systems of small and medium enterprises. Still, territorial identity facilitates strategic convergence among local actors and guides individual and collective acting, supporting consultation mechanisms on a local basis. At the same time territorial identity is a basic resource for the resilience of territorial systems, another important component to ensure territorial development. And still territorial identity can be interpreted as one of the essential components of the *empowerment* processes concerning local communities, because, by acting as a social glue, it favors the development of a territorial subjectivity (Pollice, Urso, 2013) which can take the territory government on.

EU regional policies in the rural field have certainly contributed to activate those empowerment processes either directly, by requiring local communities’ active involvement and promoting the implementation of stable forms of consultation among local actors, or indirectly, by supporting initiatives aimed at enhancing the endogenous potential, including traditions and local knowledge: these are elements which usually have a high identity value and, therefore, an aggregating power within local communities.

The Leader<sup>2</sup> approach proved to be greatly effective: its validity was also

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<sup>2</sup> «The acronym LEADER derives from the French words “Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Économique Rurale” which means, “Links between the rural economy and development actions”. The idea was to enlist the energy and resources of people and bodies that could contribute to the rural development process by forming partnerships at a sub-regional level between the public, private and civil sectors. In 1990, when a group of officials at

globally recognized by organizations like Oecd and Fao. Leader intends, in fact, to promote a model of endogenous, local, self-centered development, which is focused on the enhancement of the territorial potential and on the networking of all forces operating in the area, encouraging an enlarged governance which can, in turns, integrate and make the territory and its productive resources operational. The contribution of Leader to the strengthening of the territorial identity of rural areas is both direct and indirect, in that it is due either to the implementation itself of this specific approach to development, and to adoption of policies activating those processes of signification which are the basis for the creation/strengthening of local identities (Turco, 2010). In summary, the Leader approach encourages the pursuit of the following objectives: 1) fostering dialogue among local actors by strengthening the network of relationships, a sense of community and favoring a strategic convergence; 2) enhancing local productive traditions which are tangible and intangible elements to which territorial identity is linked; 3) building or strengthening, through actions of territorial branding, a place image reflecting and summarizing its identity; 4) attracting, through tourist promotion, tourist flows interested in the specificity of place, contributing to develop a sense of pride for its cultural uniqueness and of attachment to its territory in the local population; 5) collecting and promoting local culture, also through the promotion of those “places of memory”.

For all these reasons, the LEADER approach, at least potentially, is a valid strategy for that “rebirth of rural areas”, as this rebirth, as Magnaghi stated, «requires a strong self-identification of local community, which takes new possession of its own territory, recognizing it in the history of the territory, in its environmental balances, in its cultural, economic, aesthetic and organizational values, in a growth process lead by the promotion of its internal qualities» (Magnaghi, 1994, p. 33).

Nonetheless, beyond its undoubted potential and the scientific basis of the development model that inspires the LEADER approach, the results achieved in the areas where it was adopted do not appear to be always satisfactory or even contradictory. Firstly, the regional differences existing between the rural areas in which it was applied influenced the efficiency of the application of this model; secondly, a crucial role seems to be played by some elements such as social capital and place identity. A lack of social capital prevents the necessary social cohesion around the territorial project and the development of those horizontal and vertical networking processes

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the European Commission came up with the proposal for LEADER, this concept of connecting with people was quite new. The LEADER approach is associated with local empowerment through local strategy development and resource allocation. The main tool for the application of the LEADER approach to area development and involving local representatives in decision-making is the Local Action Group (LAG).

[http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/leader/leader/leader-tool-kit/the-leader-approach/en/the-leader-approach\\_en.html](http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-static/leader/leader/leader-tool-kit/the-leader-approach/en/the-leader-approach_en.html).

which are the basis of any form of community driven development. Similarly, the absence of a strong territorial identity leads to the uncritical adoption – on the part of local actors – of some models of exogenous development, usually characterized by a lack of territorial coherence or even by an environmental incompatibility, defeating the endogenous approach that EU rural policies intend to promote.

This is why reflecting on these policies, on their effectiveness, and on the relationship linking them to the construction of territorial identities has a great value overcoming the theoretic boundaries of the scientific debate and rather becoming a productive contribution for redefining rural development policies, making an attempt to build a dialectic and constructive relationship with policy-makers.

### *3. Issues, contexts, goals involved*

From landscape to the multi-functional nature of agricultural areas, from eco-museums to creative industries, the contributions that follow analyse the relationship between identity and territorial rural development from different angles, and in reference to very different spaces. From the French Auvergne to Romanian Transylvania, from Italian Friuli to the Balkan Macedonia, it is a journey through the European territory that travels on the road that the effects of European rural development policies have had in different contexts, sometimes producing positive, emblematic results, sometimes raising issues that are not easy to solve.

Such is the case demonstrated by **Patrizia Burlando**, regarding Tramonti (Liguria), in the Natural Park of the Cinque Terre, included in the World Heritage List for its unique landscape qualities. The author, in fact, asks whether it is more important to safeguard the heritage of the historic terracing, which are tiring to work, resulting in abandonment and subsequent environmental hazards, or if it is better to continue the agricultural activities with more advanced techniques, which might alter the landscape, but would ensure stability to the soils and improve economic yields to the local area. **Alma Bianchetti** and **Andrea Guaran** describe instead the case of Friuli, a territory with a traditional rural imprint that following the post-earthquake reconstruction of 1976 has enjoyed a period of unprecedented economic development, but which has resulted in the loosening of the ties between the territory and the local community. The authors therefore focus on eco-museums, for their role as creators of identity, participation and awareness, and for the economic redevelopment of local products.

A positive example regarding local products is given by **Sabine Chabrat**, in describing a local area in the French Auvergne, which has focused on the development of a breed of native cattle. The author explains the history of this marginal territory and of its main resource, pointing out how the local community has been able to overcome reticence and conflicts to direct their common energies towards a shared development project, which has led to recognition by the PDO (Protected Designation of Origin). But rural

development based on local participation can also be triggered by the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which is also place-specific. As part of the so-called “creative industries”, **Ana Isabel Escalona-Orcao and colleagues** propose a methodology that is able to identify positive external input for the rural economy and describe the case of Teruel, in Aragon, where a medieval re-enactment has become a source for local development, involving more people and generating social cohesion around the collective commitment to the area.

But who are the people that promote development on a basis of local identity and sustainability? And why, with what purposes? The contribution of **Oana Ramona Ilovan** and **Zoltan Marosi** focuses on the theme of formal and informal leadership in local development processes. Taking the concept of leadership as a relational process that is trans-sectoral (public and private) and trans-cultural (across several cultures), the authors describe the case of Viscri, in Transylvania, where the development of the local heritage is involving different social groups, regardless of cultural belonging and territorial provenance. In the case of Montenegro, explained by **Emilia Sarno**, on the other hand, the process of rural development is still in the hands of government institutions, even if with more up-to date ideas compared to those of the old communist system. The author describes the case of a former large state wine-producing company that is reorganizing its activities in an eco-tourism and multifunctional sense, focusing on the quality of its products, so as to form a useful example for similar Eastern European situations. On the subject of eco-tourism development, **Annamaria Pioletti** points out the close connection between landscape, culture, typical productions and rural development, and proposes the idea of “geo-tours” of food and of wine that include landscape and cultural resources, by involving local residents and tourists in active, informed and sustainable experiences of the territory.

Multi-functionality is thus confirmed as a process that is taking place in several European rural contexts; but how can we quantify and qualify this idea of multi-functionality? The contribution by **Luca Rizzo** proposes a methodology based on geo-referenced indicators and applies it to the case of Veneto. The author shows that in this Italian region, multi-functionality is primarily expressed in ‘broadening’ (e.g. agro-tourism) rather than in ‘deepening’ (e.g. organic farming) and involves only a few marginal areas, despite their considerable potential and the opportunities for European funding.

This takes us back to the need for participatory, inter-sectoral and contextualized development approaches, as European rural development policies have been urging for at least thirty years. The contribution of **Giulia Urso** and **Antonella Ricciardelli** focuses on the instruments of vertical integration (e.g. sector agreements) and horizontal integration (e.g. rural districts) adopted in Italy to promote synergy and complementarity between the actors involved, proposing some guidelines to promote integration between these instruments, which ensures both the competitiveness of

production in the global market and the improvement of rural areas. But it is certainly not easy to intervene in contexts of chronic marginality, linked to unresolved structural issues. **Luigi Scrofani and Claudio Novembre** illustrate the case of Sicily, the Italian region with enormous environmental, cultural and productive resources, where serious imbalances remain between coastal and inland areas, as well as between sub-areas. Because of these imbalances proposals are being put forward for the administrative reorganization of Sicily, that the authors hope will be based on shared characteristics, strategies and objectives, rather than anachronistic or opportunistic identity values.

In conclusion, we thank all the authors for their efforts in this international experience, and we hope that the contents of this issue will inspire collective reflections, especially in those rural contexts where people have decontextualized lifestyles and goals, losing their deep and creative link with their spaces of living and acting.

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## *L'identità territoriale come risorsa strategica per lo sviluppo rurale*

Le zone rurali costituiscono una presenza essenziale nell'UE: la specificità ecossistemica, paesaggistica e culturale che le connota costituisce un patrimonio di inestimabile valore, che rischia di essere perduto se non intervengono soluzioni in grado di invertire i trend di degrado sociale, economico e demografico che riguardano molte di esse. Le politiche di sviluppo rurale del periodo 2007-13 (Reg. 1698/2005) hanno attribuito particolare rilievo al cosiddetto "approccio Leader" maturato nella precedente fase di programmazione 2000-2006 ovvero alla "messa a punto ed attuazione di progetti altamente specifici da parte di partenariati locali, al fine di rispondere a particolari problemi locali". In vista del prossimo periodo di programmazione (2014-2020) è opportuno fornire ai decisori un quadro della situazione generata dai suddetti interventi, al fine di superare le criticità emerse nelle precedenti fasi e di proporre strategie e soluzioni innovative. Dopo un'introduzione sul tema delle strette relazioni che intercorrono tra identità territoriale e politiche di sviluppo rurale in Europa, l'articolo presenta in chiave critica i contributi presentati e discussi alla Sessione 32 ("Rural development policy and local identities in the European Union") del IV Congresso EUGEO (Rome, 12-14 settembre 2013), e raccolti nel numero speciale di questa rivista.

## *L'identité territoriale comme une ressource stratégique pour le développement rural*

Les zones rurales sont une présence essentielle dans l'UE: l'écosystème spécifique, le paysage et la culture qui connotent elles est un trésor d'une valeur inestimable, qui est susceptible d'être perdues si elles ne sont pas des solutions pour inverser la tendance de dégradation sociale, économique et démographique qui couvrent plusieurs d'entre eux. Les politiques de développement rural pour la période 2007-13 (Reg. 1698/2005) attachent une importance particulière à « l'approche Leader » développé dans la phase précédente de 2000-2006 ou le « développement et la mise en œuvre des projets par hautement spécifique partenariats locaux afin de répondre à des problèmes locaux spécifiques ». En vue de la prochaine période de programmation (2014-2020) devrait fournir aux décideurs un aperçu de la situation créée par ces interventions, afin de surmonter les problèmes qui sont apparus dans les étapes précédentes et de proposer des stratégies et des solutions innovantes. Après une introduction sur le thème de la relation étroite entre l'identité territoriale et des politiques de développement rural en Europe, l'article présente de manière critique les contributions présentées et discutées lors de la Session 32 ("La politique de développement rural et les identités locales dans l'Union Européenne") du IV Congrès EUGEO (Rome, 12-14 Septembre 2013), et recueillis dans le numéro spécial de cette revue.