

The inland areas of Sicily. From rural development to territorial reorganization

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1. *Introduction*

In the last decades of economic globalization we have seen the expansion of urban areas in the world that have lived a period of great changes linked to the decentralization of production and the related creation of many services to enterprises, the division of fragmented and precarious labor (Pred, 1977; Le Galés, 2006; Dematteis *et al.*, 2010; Scrofani, 2012). In Sicily, this phenomenon has aggravated the contrast between the coastal metropolitan cities which offer public and private services (Palermo, Catania and Messina) and the depopulation of inland areas historically characterized by the presence of agricultural activities. These areas often are inaccessible and sometimes unknown to global flows, demonstrating economic and cultural marginality yet (Cencini, 1983; Leone, 1986; Ministero Coesione Territoriale, 2013).

In this paper we deepen the current condition of the inland areas of Sicily, demonstrating how the depopulation cannot be faced only by the modernization of agriculture, but the new ways of economic and social development – that retains and root populations – should also be inspired by the territorial reorganization of these areas. This issue assumes a particular significance in Sicily because of the cancellation of the provinces ordered in the regional law of March 2013. New strength and resources can be got from the territorial re-composition of these areas, facilitating their exit from the condition of marginality and starting new growth paths.

2. *Depopulation of inland areas*

During the period between 2001-2011 the trend towards the concentration of the population along northern and eastern coastal strips has been strengthened, above all near the metropolitan towns, while the density of people living in the more inland areas of the Sicily is diminishing. The gap,

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therefore, between these two realities has been strengthened and the demographic loss in the internal areas is one of the most striking signals. The metropolitan areas and the coastal areas grew at significant rates between 1971 and 2011: census data show an increase of 16.2% in coastal areas and of 19.1% in the metropolitan city of Catania and of 9.3% in the metropolitan city of Palermo. In the same period (1971-2011) the data referred to Sicilian inland towns show a noticeable reduction in population of about 108,000 units, with a negative percentage variation of 8.1% that could even be more serious, if the positive performance of the inland portions of the province of Catania and Trapani are excluded (all the other provinces have lost an important percentage of population with even a rate of 19.5% in the province of Messina) (Tab.1).

Tab. 1 – Population lived in Sicilian provinces between 1971-2011.

Provinces	1971		1981		1991		2001		2011		var. % inland areas 1971-11
	Total population	% inland areas	Total population	% inland areas	Total population	% inland areas	Total population	% inland areas	Total population	% inland areas	
Agrigento	454.381	30,0	466.627	29,0	476.158	28,5	448.053	27,0	446.837	25,9	-15,1
Caltanissetta	282.191	67,6	285.943	64,7	278.275	64,2	274.035	63,4	273.099	62,0	-11,2
Catania	939.836	26,4	1.006.075	25,5	1.035.665	25,8	1.054.778	24,9	1.078.766	25,3	10,1
Enna	202.064	100,0	190.958	100,0	186.182	100,0	177.200	100,0	173.451	100,0	-14,2
Messina	690.689	27,7	707.321	25,9	687.359	25,3	662.450	24,5	691.167	22,3	-19,5
Palermo	1.124.212	20,2	1.198.499	18,3	1.224.778	17,7	1.235.923	16,8	1.243.585	16,2	-11,1
Ragusa	255.532	6,3	274.698	5,6	289.733	5,3	295.264	5,0	307.492	4,7	-10,2
Siracusa	345.777	20,8	394.667	16,2	402.014	16,2	396.167	16,5	399.933	16,6	-7,8
Trapani	405.484	13,2	420.817	13,2	426.710	14,0	425.121	14,1	429.917	14,0	12,5
TOTAL	4.700.166	28,5	4.945.605	26,4	5.006.874	25,9	4.968.991	25,1	5.044.247	24,4	-8,1

Source: Author's elaboration. Inland areas are identified using Istat data on the basis of the criteria established by the Law of Presidente della Regione Siciliana (10 May 1989) and Ministero Coesione Territoriale (2013).

Farming is still a key sector in the development of the inland towns, as demonstrated by the emblematic case of the Sinagra Local work system identified by ISTAT, which notwithstanding it being specialized in the textile sector exports above all agricultural products (ISTAT, 2009-2011). Even if the farmers apply the idea and practices of multifunctional farming – that do not just offer products but also green services in conformity with respect for the environment, help for the biological and integrated fight, safeguarding of the landscape and quality brands of the territory – the agricultural changes have not been sufficient to stop the depopulation phenomena. A phenomenon that occurs above all in towns with fewer than 5000 inhabitants.

In Sicily farm land has increased by 10% in the last 10 years in spite of the significant reduction in the number of farms (Amodio, 2013, p. 221). An apparent contradiction which is justified by the increase in cultivated land surfaces per farm in the inland areas. In fact, even if the size of the farms is medium-small in all the provinces of Sicily, in Enna there are also many farms with an utilized agricultural area greater than 30 hectares. This is explained by the particular morphology of the land in this province that favors extensive farming, which is prevalent and requires machinery which works better in large plots of land.

Undoubtedly, in the inland areas of Sicily, the policies of rural development based essentially on the competitiveness of the products, on the backing of product prices, on help to producers and on the quality of products have been replaced by an approach inspired by sustainable development, the safeguarding of the environment, conservation of the landscape and culture of the territory. However, in Sicily, according to the National Strategic Plan for Rural Development 2007-2013, an approach which increases competitiveness and the conservation of the natural environment have been favored rather than the new paradigm of rural development, based on multi-functionality of the farm instruments in rebuilding the relationship between the socio-economic framework and the farms and therefore in the remodeling of production according to the new needs of the communities (Van der Ploeg, 2000). This is particularly clear in the distribution of resources of funding for rural development FEASR 2007-2013 which Sicily was awarded a share of 42% to “improve the environment and natural space by sustaining the management of the territory” and the same share to “increase competitiveness” (De Rubertis *et al.*, 2013, p.192).

3. *Economic activities in inland areas*

In the Sicilian inland areas, productive districts or successfully acclaimed specializations that would guarantee a high income for the whole population do not exist. It is, however, possible to deal with individual cases of success of businesspeople or groups of businesspeople who succeed positively in connoting a local area (Ruggiero, Scrofani 1998). During the recent economic crisis many companies and some small systems have gone bankrupt. For example the textile productive area around Bronte is disappearing as is the textile productive system in province of Enna; the plastic production in Regalbuto is floundering and stone-cutting district around Mount Etna is also in noticeable difficulty, as is the ceramic production in the area of Caltagirone.

The rural sector, however, remains important. Substantial forestry is concentrated in Southern Italy which should be exploited to attract tourists rather than to employ forest workers precariously (80% of the 61 thousand forestry workers in Italy are employed in Sicily, Sardinia and Calabria). The land area dedicated to biological farming is around about 700 thousand hectares, putting together Sicily, Sardinia, the Campania and Calabria

(equal to 62% of Italy). The inland areas of Sicily have become excellent land for biological cultivation methods, above all when conversion becomes a chance to break into new foreign and national markets.

As far as holiday farmhouses, from 1994 (the first organic law on holiday farmhouses in Sicily) farms that ask for authorization have been continually increasing, even if the funding which characterized and stimulated the explosion of these businesses together with that of rural tourism in the early years, is by now rare. This modality of integrating agricultural income has become convenient for many farms in order to maintain an awesome patrimony of rural buildings, farms and country houses otherwise destined to rack and ruin.

Notwithstanding the continual increase of farms, rooms and visitors in recent years, there are marked differences between the provinces. For example the exploit of the Arethusan provinces with more than 100 holiday farmhouse can't be ignored, situated as much in inland areas (in the towns of Sortino, Rosolini, Carlentini and Palazzolo Acreide) as in the coastal areas or areas near the coast, with a balance between accommodation and catering which denotes an important offer for tourism and an alternative to hotel accommodation. Instead in the province of Palermo the holiday farmhouses are strongly aimed at catering to the detriment of accommodation (1.719 rooms and 6.283 place settings). Among the big provinces of the Sicily a significant presence of holiday farmhouses both in Messina and Catania is recognizable, also for the quality of the agricultural production and for the adoption of methods of biological farming (37 farms out of 108 offer biological products in the province of Messina and 18 out of 100 in the province of Catania) (Tab.2).

Tab. 2 - Holiday farmhouses in Sicilian provinces on December 2011.

Provinces	Holiday farmhouses			
	Total number	Using organic farming method	N. of beds	Place settings
Agrigento	29	2	552	810
Caltanissetta	20	1	225	1081
Catania	100	18	1704	2998
Enna	33	13	492	1406
Messina	108	37	1714	3119
Palermo	93	1	1719	6283
Ragusa	58	0	839	2420
Siracusa	107	0	1820	3922
Trapani	45	1	859	1620
TOTAL	593	73	9.924	23.659

Source: Author's elaboration on Regione Siciliana data.

Except for the provinces of Siracusa and Trapani, in the rest of Sicily the majority of the holiday farmhouses are located in the inner areas. In the province of Palermo, in the area of the Madonia mountains the towns of Castelbuono, Petralia Soprana and Sottana dominate, while in the province of Catania on the slopes of Mount Etna the towns of Linguaglossa, Randazzo, Piedimonte, Zafferana and Castiglione di Sicilia dominate; in the province of Messina the towns in the Nebrodi mountains. In the provinces of Enna and Caltanissetta a large number of holiday farmhouses are situated right in the territory of the two chief towns, while tourism in the towns of Piazza Armerina, Nicosia, Sperlinga, Troina and Leonforte stands out.

The inland areas undoubtedly suffer from the competition of the hotel accommodation and facilities situated along the coasts or in the rural spaces, even if rare, near the biggest conurbations of Sicily. However, margins for development still exist in this sector in Southern Italy which accounts for only 20% today of holiday farmhouses in the whole of Italy. In the other regions the farms are more committed both to quality and diversification of services as well as to the certification of the structures and the typical products that catch the attention of the European markets. Also in Sicily greater care has been placed on the choice of typical products to safeguard, asking for their recognition by the European authorities. Olive oil, cheeses, wines, honey and many other products have become excellent vehicles of promotion of the inland territories that moreover suffer the competition of products obtained from cultivations in cloches or intensive breeding along the limited coastal spaces where very different and often incompatible businesses fight over the land (besides agriculture, industry, tourism, trade, the main infrastructures and transport structures but above all urbanization consume space).

According to the latest survey of the national List of traditional agricultural products Sicily is one of the Italian regions with the highest number of typical local products, many of which are ascribable to the inland areas of the Sicily. Besides the typical products of the whole of Sicily, it is possible to identify exactly more than 23 ascribable to the inland areas of the Nebrodi mountains, the Madonia mountains, Mount Etna, the Iblean mountains and the Sicani mountains (Ministero Politiche Agricole, 2013).

A clear example of an attempt of multifunctional transformation of the rural Sicilian world is demonstrated by the business carried out by the Groups of Local Action (GAL) in the sphere of the Leader programme. The GALs (12 in the inland areas and 5 that concern the areas along the coast) are also an emblematic case of governance of the territory where public and private subjects converge. Governance of the territory, which is often associated with the agricultural exploitation of the soil and the enhancement of cultural resources and tourism, with life styles and peasant customs of mountainous and hilly areas, that get from their very isolation a uniqueness of living conditions that can be used to attract visitors and consumers of products that aren't for mass consumption (www.reteleader.it).

The landscapes of the inland areas probably constitute the main

patrimony for the local populations: the alternation of plateaus, hills and mountains, with continual changes in colours and of products tied to the seasons, tied to the few inhabitants left in these places, constitutes a unique identity for them (an identity based on not only the rural buildings and the landscape but also on old activities, crafts, customs and traditions: see for example the studies on the rural buildings and cultural and touristic itineraries of Sicilian small towns (AA.VV., 1973; Dufour, La Gumina, 1999; Ruggiero, Scrofani, 2000). Nevertheless this landscape has been endangered in recent years by the search for methods of development “at any cost” like the one that yearned for from the installation of wind turbines, the authorization of which often does not bear in mind that private interests are preferred rather than the landscape which is a common patrimony. The whole of Southern Italy suffers from the change in energy policies in Italy that, by offering funding for wind energy production has favored the installation of energy producing windmills – thanks to the presence of the necessary conditions, the windiness, the distribution of mountain ranges and the accessibility – which generate 98% of Italian power: in particular Sicily, Apulia and the Campania host 60% of the Italian wind turbines with a significant distortion of the landscape features (Svimez, 2012).

4. Conclusion

The economic analysis of the inland areas, even though it highlights the ever important role of farming, reveals that these territories are not capable of keeping young people who leave in search of better working and living conditions. The inland towns are not even able to carry out urban functions comparable to those carried out by the cities and by the medium sized towns along the coasts. The only important functions are traceable to the administrative-bureaucratic framework that recreates itself by feeding on systems of patronage and charity. However, in the last twenty years new resources have arrived from the European Union forcing all the towns to develop an autonomous planning capacity. The organizational models of the rural territories inspired by the Leader Approach mix with those linked to the organization of tourism, to those related to strategic planning and even to those which make up the Regional landscape Plan.

On the other hand, in order to get new European and national funding the towns have grouped together, making deals and conventions which define different geographical set regardless they belong to a province or to previous agreements (referred for example to a specific tourist district or to an agreement stipulated for a strategic plan or, in the past, a territorial pact or a project of territorial integration). In other words the towns are associated to get common objectives, overcoming different points of view and political beliefs. In fact, the recognition of the now widespread practice of overcoming local dimensions in order to search for optimal delimitations/ dimensions to achieve particular aims (tourist, infrastructural, environmental, productive, strategic-functional ones) refutes the position of individual mayors and of

county councils of exasperation of localism and of the improvement only of their own local resources within administrative boundaries.

In order to get out of a situation of backwardness and ruin of vast inland areas it is necessary to think courageously of new solutions for territorial reorganization. In this direction, the occasion was provided by the regional government, which abolished all provinces in March 2013 (law n. 7 on 27/3/2013), opening the political and social debate on the opportunity to re-think new groups of towns like “consortiums of free towns” expected by the Constitution of the Sicily. In addition to the establishment of the metropolitan cities of Palermo and Catania (each composed of 27 towns) and Messina (composed of 51 towns), has initiated a broad negotiating activity that involves about 300 towns (for example, some politicians of Enna Province are talking with the politicians of Calatino area excluded from the metropolitan city of Catania to create an unique consortium of towns).

Certainly there are many difficulties and resistance to this grouping as well experiences of confusing aggregations such as those made to exploit regional call for bids for the recognition of tourist districts for which funding was promised.

These considerations on the local communities and on the groupings of towns highlight the need for coordination on a regional scale, that must know how to match the territorial groups on the basis of themes, common objectives, resources that make up the common denominator in respect for local institutions. These local institutions must only be defended when they are synonyms of values of identity but must be overstepped when they express a useless bastion in the defense of anachronistic local pride or worse still when they are the result of political interests which are often harmful for the local community itself. The territorial reorganization of the inland areas must not, therefore, be inspired by a top-down approach, but by the opportunity to group efforts and energy which consolidate the local communities rooted in the territories which are knots in the international networks of business, flows and knowledge.

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Le zone interne della Sicilia.

Dallo sviluppo rurale alla riorganizzazione territoriale

La terziarizzazione dell'economia mondiale e l'espansione di grandi aree urbane, la divisione del lavoro frammentato e instabile hanno aggravato in Sicilia il contrasto tra le aree metropolitane costiere e lo spopolamento delle aree interne, storicamente caratterizzate dalla presenza di attività agricole. Gli autori di questo articolo prendono in considerazione le dinamiche demografiche delle aree interne della Sicilia in relazione ai tentativi di avviare processi di sviluppo economico, prevalentemente incentrati sulla valorizzazione delle risorse agricole. Ma, né la trasformazione del mondo rurale siciliano, né le altre sporadiche iniziative economiche sono state sufficienti a trattenere la popolazione. Le comunità locali ripongono invece molteplici speranze dell'abolizione delle province, avvenuta nel marzo 2013, che ha innescato un vivace dibattito sulle nuove forme di aggregazioni territoriali per migliorare non solo le attività produttive ma anche le attività turistiche, i servizi urbani e strategici.

Les régions intérieures de la Sicile.

Du développement rural à la réorganisation territoriale

Le secteur des services de l'économie mondiale et l'expansion des grandes zones urbaines, la division du travail qui devient fragmenté et instable ont aggravé en Sicile le contraste entre les zones métropolitaines côtières et le dépeuplement des régions internes qui historiquement ont été caractérisées par la présence d'activités agricoles. Les auteurs de cet article analysent les dynamiques démographiques des zones internes de la Sicile en relation aux essais visant à démarrer des processus de développement économique qui se basent essentiellement sur la mise en valeur des ressources agricoles. Mais ni la transformation de la Sicile rurale ni d'autres initiatives économiques sporadiques ont été suffisantes pour retenir la population. D'autre part les communautés locales mettent beaucoup d'espoirs de l'abolition des provinces en Mars 2013 qui a suscité un vif débat sur les nouvelles formes d'aggrégations territoriales dans le but de développer non seulement les activités de production, mais aussi les activités touristiques et les services urbains et stratégiques.