

Organic Farming: a means of Community Conservation in Rural Areas

The role of rural communities in managing and conserving natural resources in Europe—mostly in the remote and less favourite areas—is widely recognised. But population in rural communities is decreasing and various kinds of other changes are happening, affecting conservation of the landscape and natural resources. In the most remote areas of Europe, agriculture, which used to be the main source of income, has become much less profitable because of the global market and the wide offer of cheap food. This is leading people to abandon the land—not necessarily a good thing for nature and biodiversity. Many of the concerned territories are part of National/Regional Parks or Natura 2000 sites, dedicated to nature conservation and sometimes sustainable tourism. Local communities actively managing their territories are necessary to achieve these goals... and especially so as most park agencies in Europe have very limited staff. Rural communities in Italy are an example of all these trends. People are abandoning the countryside and moving to villages, agriculture becomes a sort of hobby or part time job, the few remaining farms get larger and larger while employing fewer people, transhumance is becoming rare, and even rarer is to find Italians driving the flocks (the Italian countryside is becoming multiethnic and multiracial).

In this broad context, organic farming offers an interesting opportunity to foster development and revitalization of rural territories all over Europe, and in Italy in particular. There are some good examples of areas that changed attitude in the last 15 years:

- La Valle del Biologico (the Organic Valley) in Liguria
- The Biodistrict of Cilento and lately the Grecanico one in Calabria, with 92 municipalities involved in first one, 15 in the latter (other 3 bio-districts are coming up in central Italy).
- Several “bio-excellences” in the National Parks (www.bioeccellenze.it).

Organic farming is not only a system of production. Organic farming is about people, and it is based on a different relation between producers and consumers/citizens, between producers and public institutions. The movement was born with a strong involvement of consumers, both seeking not only a different way of production (more sustainable), but also a different way to achieve it (local, short supply chain). There are several successful good practices introduced by the OF movement in Italy in the last decades:

- GAS (Solidarity Purchase Groups) buying food directly from the farmer, which has rapidly developed and has become a real social movement. It originated in the cities but now it is possible to find GAS also in small towns closer to rural areas.
- GODO (Organised Groups of Supply and Demand). The idea is to create a group of both producers and consumers, associated to AIAB, that promote a responsible consumption based on local territory, seasons and direct exchange. The organized

groups assure a fair price for both consumers and producers, considering them part of the same system. The group main activity is the collective purchase of local organic products but also guided taste events, cultural activities, technical trainings on organic farming, through which the group participants share common objectives and find new way of collaboration (www.aiabumbria.com/it/godo).

- PGS (Participatory Guarantee Systems), originated in Latin America is now making its first steps in Italy, creating lots of enthusiasm. PGS is a system of control and certification of organic farming taken up together by farmers and their consumers, without the involvement of a third part certification, which is stiffening the system because of its costs and bureaucracy. It is diffusing OF among small farms, mostly in the remote areas. Recent experiments have been conducted in the Maremma Park and the province of Genova.

Organic farming suits well natural resources conservation because it contributes to many aspects of sustainability. It significantly reduces the negative environmental impacts of farming, for example reducing green house gas emissions, nutrient pollution to water and pesticide contamination of food and in the environment. And it is more energy efficient, delivers better animal welfare and soil quality, and protects biodiversity.

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