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**ORCID**

FM: 0000-0001-5338-4333

BAE 10th Anniversary paper

## Rural areas between locality and global networks. Local development mechanisms and the role of policies empowering rural actors

FRANCESCO MANTINO

*Consiglio per la ricerca in agricoltura e l'analisi dell'economia agraria (CREA)*

**Abstract.** The main objective of this work is to review the recent achievements on the mechanisms explaining local and rural development, which underpin the current definition of rural areas in the European literature. The analysis carried out in this article acknowledges a gap between local development processes and the current representation of rural diversity by international organisations and national/regional authorities. New concepts can be drawn from this comparative analysis: 1) rural diversity cannot be explained exclusively by agglomeration forces and geographical distance from urban centres; b) multiple functions of rural areas, often rooted into sustainable agri-food systems or other forms of territorial capital, contribute to explain more autonomous roles of rural areas; c) organised or relational proximity is emerging in a context of a globalised economy and non-geographical networks, as a critical factor of connection between rural areas and distant regions/markets. This article translates these different disciplinary developments into a practical and integrated conceptual approach, in which local development processes result from three components: local resource systems, networks, institutions and enabling policies.

**Keywords:** rural development, local development, regional disparities, networks, rural policies.

**JEL codes:** O13, O18, Q18, R11, R12, R58.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Rural development is a topic that still deserves attention both in research programmes and policymaking. Since the key paper on *L'avenir du monde rurale* ("The future of rural society") was published in 1988, European Commission clearly identified, for the first time, the need for a territorial rural policy that went beyond agriculture and included local development and environmental concerns as key elements (European Commission, 1988). Indeed, a key feature of the debate about rural development is the close interaction between research and policy (Bock, 2016), that translates into reciprocal influences over time in a complex relationship that deserves some future analysis (Bryden and Mantino, 2018). In the context of EU mutual relations between research and policy design, the rural development research, especially in rural sociology and agricultural economics, gained social relevance,

especially for the CAP reform. In contrast, economic geography and development economics contributed notably to the regional cohesion policy revision over time. Still, rigid boundaries among different disciplines have been reduced, and in several research projects we can see examples of interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation.

After forty years of debates about the conceptualization of rural development and its role within the CAP, and more generally the EU framework, it is hard to say that the scientific process brought about a single, unified theory. Nevertheless, the knowledge of the rural development processes has been significantly enriched in these decades by the contribution of different disciplines. In addition, there are different paradigms and visions of rural areas between disciplines as well as within the same discipline. In the vast literature on the topic, there is no consensus about the driving forces of rural development, and multiple development trajectories are possible, resulting from various combinations of local, regional, national and global forces in a given context (Ward and Hite, 1998).

The main objective of this work is to review the recent achievements on the mechanisms explaining local and rural development, which underpin the current conceptualisation of rural areas in the European policy-making and research. This article is structured as follows. First, it begins with exploring how the diversity of rural areas is represented in the most recent literature, both with regards to the urban-rural relations and the differences within the rurality (section 2). In this regard, we think there is a gap between the current representation of rural areas and the recent rural development theories, as achieved by the different disciplinary approaches in rural sociology, rural/economic geography, agricultural economics and development economics. The main problem, in our opinion, is that official definitions and analyses of rural diversity in Europe do not match the complexity of rural processes as they emerge from research and policy analysis (section 3). We conduct an interdisciplinary review of the theoretical approaches to rural development processes (sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3) and then we seek to explore how these achievements have influenced policy frameworks, notably place-based policies and policy approaches targeting the most peripheral/marginalised rural areas (section 3.4). The article proceeds, in the light of the development factors examined by the different theoretical approaches, with an exploration of how these approaches can contribute to creating a different theoretical framework (section 4), which re-defines the functions of rural areas, not simply depending on functional relations with urban centres but considering the capacity of rural actors to develop

more autonomous networks and development pathways. The article ends with drawing up implications for future research and policy actions (section 5).

## 2. THE REPRESENTATION OF THE RURAL DIVERSITY AND INCREASING RURAL-URBAN DISPARITIES

The definitions of “rural” and “rurality” has been a hot topic in both scholarly and policy debates for almost 60 years. While trying to define ‘rurality’, researchers have proposed various typologies based on different quantifiable criteria. In recent decades, a series of relevant research projects and activities have provided substantial evidence on the diversity of rural areas. Approaches and methods to analyse and describe rural diversity have changed over time, moving from simple indicators of population density and percentage of rural population to more elaborate criteria, units of reference and thresholds (Copus et al., 2008; Féret et al., 2020). There is consensus on two points across the definitions, approaches, and scientific positions on the subject of rurality. First, rurality is a concept that is difficult to define. Rural areas have undergone profound economic and social changes since the early agricultural policies aimed at modernisation and land management in the 1960s. As a consequence, rurality can no longer be defined solely according to farming activities and associated lifestyles. Second, determining rurality depends on several factors (Féret et al., 2020): 1) the global contexts (i.e. the characteristics of the socio-economic systems of which the rurality is a part); 2) the discourse and political objectives that were pursued; 3) the social representations of the different categories of stakeholders.

In Europe, each country has developed its own definition of rurality, often as a response to a particular political, administrative and the broadest territorial context, and in some cases as an output of national classifications of other factors (e.g. population, accessibility). Approaches and definitions are rarely similar between countries (Depraz, 2007; Bontron, 1996).

Methods combining several criteria have been adopted since rural areas were recognised as complex and unable to be characterised by a single criterion. Six types of approaches can be identified in the literature: 1) the administrative (or statutory) approach, based on the legal-administrative character; 2) the morphological (or demographic) approach, based on population criteria such as population density; 3) the locational approach, based on spatial relationships between urban and rural areas; 4) the functional approach; 5) the landscape approach, based on land-cover and climatic

conditions; and 6) the combined approach, which used a combination of at least two of the other approaches (Féret et al., 2020).

The functional approach has been recently used in the OECD Rural 3.0 Policy Note (2018), based on the relationships between rural and urban centres and the proximity to urban centres as factors conducive to economic performance and development potentials. A functional urban area (FUA) includes a town and its surroundings consisting of less densely populated local units which are nevertheless part of the town's labour market due to commuting, i.e. people travelling from their place of residence to the labour market and/or to access services (healthcare, education, culture, shops, etc.) (Dijkstra and Poelman, 2019). This approach has gained particular interest in the last decades due to the transnational (EUROSTAT and OECD) institutional legitimisation (OECD, 2018). According to this definition, OCDE has further developed the classical distinction between predominantly urban, intermediate and predominantly rural areas into a new typology: a) rural areas within an FUA, which are an integral part of the commuting zone of the urban centre; b) rural areas close to an FUA, which have strong linkages to a nearby FUA, but are not part of its labour market; c) remote rural areas, distant from an FUA and somehow connected through the market exchange of goods and services. In this model, the proximity of less than 1 hour travel time to a large urban region is an essential predictor of rural growth: “*proximity allows stronger linkages between urban and rural places*” (OECD, 2018) since it allows better access to services, healthcare, education and transports, thus rural areas within or close to an FUA are more advantaged than remote rural areas. Remote areas dwellers, instead, can count on better environmental conditions and more affordable housing. Rural regions close to cities displayed higher productiv-

ity growth before the 2008 economic crisis, and higher resilience after the crisis began (Table 1), whilst remote regions were the most badly affected by the crisis, with an annual average drop of GDP per capita of -2.5%, almost ten times worse than rural regions close to cities.

This representation of rural differences masks a more diversified situation and re-defines the functions of rural areas as dependent on the sphere of influence of various types of urban areas and as ‘commuting zones’. The OECD model seems to neglect rural areas’ capability to develop autonomous functions associated with specific assets and opportunities in terms of local development. Furthermore, as we will see in the following sections, there is an evident gap between the knowledge achievements about rural diversity and the most relevant representations of rural areas in international and national policy documents. In short, the definition of rural areas related to the OECD approach does not seem to respond to the need to effectively understand rural areas diversity and the different opportunities for rural development (ESPON, 2021). Thus, a definition less dependent on the role of urban centres, more appropriate indicators and territorial scales seem to be necessary for policy design (Migas and Zarzycki, 2020).

Even the definition of the rural development concept has changed over time. In the 1970s, rural development was identified with agricultural modernisation, focusing on encouraging labour and capital mobility (Ward and Hite, 1998). By late 1970, this model was criticised, and theories of endogenous development (see section 3.2) emphasised the need for overcoming exclusion through capacity building (skills, institutions, infrastructures) and diversified rural economies. In the first decade of the new millennium, neo-endogenous theories, assuming the need for mixing endogenous and exogenous forces (Shucksmith, 2010), advocated a more holistic approach to address inadequate service provision, unbalanced

**Table 1.** Trends in population growth, regional GDP per capita and labour productivity.

Type of region	Average annual population growth, %		Annual average GDP per capita growth, %		Annual average labour productivity growth, %	
	2000-07	2008-12	2000-07	2008-12	2000-07	2008-12
Predominantly urban	0.76	0.67	2.39	-0.70	1.65	0.24
Intermediate	0.55	0.45	2.20	-0.28	1.57	0.65
Predominantly rural (total)	0.31	0.38	2.29	-1.11	1.97	0.12
Predominantly rural close to cities*	0.61	0.55	2.29	-0.26	2.15	0.56
Predominantly rural remote	-0.03	0.18	2.30	-2.45	1.69	-0.61
All regions	0.47	0.46	2.29	-0.70	1.74	0.34

Note: \*defined as within 1 hour travel time of a large urban centre.

Source: OECD (2018), RURAL 3.0. A framework for rural development, Paris.

communities, remoteness, isolation and lack of critical mass. This approach has to include capacity building and adding value to local resources, enhancing connectivity and promoting innovation. Also, the role of innovation became more and more relevant in many respects (governance, sustainable production, social inclusion, etc.).

### 3. DIFFERENT APPROACHES IN UNDERSTANDING RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS

Different strands of disciplines and theoretical approaches studied rural diversity and related development processes. Rural sociology, regional economics and geography, agricultural economics and development economics have often looked at rural development from different perspectives and adopting different approaches. However, manifold research projects, especially within European Horizon programmes, have been carried out in recent years through multidisciplinary efforts. At

least four relevant strands of literature have deepened the knowledge of rural development processes and provided new evidence and arguments in many directions (Figure 1). First, the group of neo-endogenous models, that evolved into networked approaches, studied in rural sociology and economic geography. As we will see, geographical differentiation factors are increasingly counterbalanced by the importance of a system of networks going beyond spatial differences.

Second, regional convergence/divergence models have studied particularly the role of factors explaining increasing territorial disparities in developed countries and rural-urban interlinkages in these diverging trajectories. The third strand of literature, focusing on clusters, territorial milieu and localised systems, explores the importance of relevant spatial processes and the role of endogenous development factors, notably locality and internal networks of actors and firms. This strand also includes the territorial agri-food systems, mainly studied by the French and Italian economic geography and agricultural economics schools.

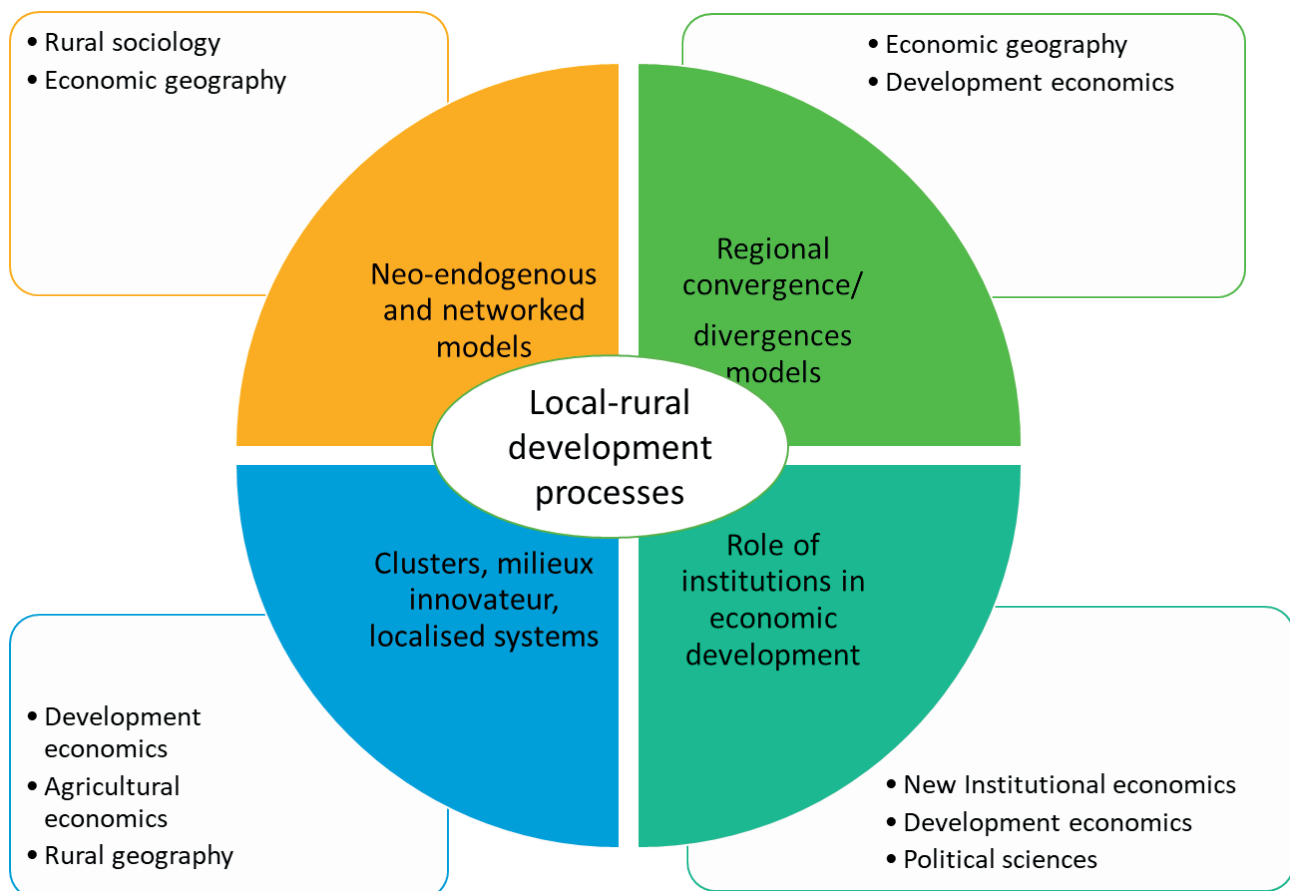


Figure 1. Different disciplinary approaches to local-rural development processes.



Finally, the fourth strand of literature explores to what extent policy institutions play a crucial role in determining the development potential of any territory. This question has been widely studied in development economics theory (North, 1990; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012).

### 3.1 Rural areas in regional development models and territorial disparities

The OECD conceptualisation of rural areas diversity heavily relies on theories of agglomeration (McCann and van Oort, 2019), which explain why urban/metropolitan areas accumulate over time comparative advantages and external economies, based on the concentration of physical and financial capital, technological innovation, research and development activities, skills and human capital. Theories of divergent development and cumulative causation models (Myrdal, 1957; Hirschman, 1958; Krugman, 1995) explain why the inter-regional disparities can persist and grow over time. The new economic geography, in particular, highlighted that since 1970 onward, and especially in the new millennium, the technological progress and the long cycle of regional evolutionary features led to increasing regional divergence (Iammarino et al., 2018). According to OECD study (2020), inter-regional disparities grew mainly, in terms of GDP per capita, in France, Italy, Germany, Poland and the US. Still, the polarisation across space is even higher when the gap is measured within the regions (at NUTS3 level). After 2009, regions near metropolitan areas have grown faster than metropolitan regions, but remote rural regions trends do not confirm the traditional divergence cities-rural areas model: they grew faster than regions with the small-medium city (OECD, 2020).

The diversity of rural areas and related wealth disparities make more complex the urban-rural dichotomy and their relationships. In the last two decades, many efforts have been focused on identifying main drivers of territorial disparities, which go beyond agglomeration forces and geographical distance from the centre. There is evidence that the economic relations between urban and rural areas do not follow a one-way functional dominance relation. For example, in-depth research conducted over recent years in the rural regions of Italy, The Netherlands and the UK have pointed out different forms of sustainable rural development (Marsden, 2009). These studies support the idea that rural areas can achieve higher territorial competitiveness and more autonomous roles in different ways: a) through local agri-food systems (LAFS), according to the definitions of the French and Italian schools (Sforzi and Man-

cini, 2012; Arfini et al., 2012; Vaquero-Piñeiro, 2021); b) alternative food networks, representing more complex and sustainable pathways within the agri-food system (Lamine et al., 2012; Sonnino and Marsden, 2005); c) horizontal networks of economic activities located within an area (Murdock, 2000), based on new synergies between agri-food, tourism, amenity, forestry, renewable energy, waste, information technologies and locality food chain developments (Marsden, 2009). These different processes imply the sustainable valorisation of “territorial capital”<sup>1</sup> (Camagni and Capello, 2012) in many rural areas. More value can be added locally, and more balanced production-consumption relations can occur between rural and urban areas.

Increasing and more complex territorial disparities also emerged in studies on the so-called peripheral territories, in particular within the framework of ESPON research programmes. Peripheralisation has been recently interpreted as a process due to different drivers (Noguera et al., 2017): a) low accessibility to centres of economic activity, in other words, localities geographically disconnected from the centre (conventional peripherality); b) poor access to services of general interest (education, healthcare, transports, etc.), whether this is a consequence of geographic remoteness, or to changing service delivery technologies, or to austerity, or other changes in the provision such as privatisation; c) absence of “relational proximity”, and exclusion from the mainstream of economic activity, due to low levels of social and institutional interaction with the broader world. These latter conditions are often associated with disconnection from the centre of political power and a lack of influence in terms of governance, and they may affect even geographically accessible regions. Most areas identified as peripheral seem to be affected by a combination of at least two of the drivers described above (Noguera et al., 2017). The ESPON study (PROFECY) estimated that peripheral areas cover approximately 45% of the European territory and only about half of them lack access to centres and services as key drivers. Another 46% is represented by areas predominantly suffering from poor economic potential and demographic situation, and the remaining 4% covers areas affected by all types of drivers. Peripherality is not a process involving only rural areas (according to the OECD nomenclature) but also a significant share of intermediate and urban and metropolitan regions (table 2), due to increasing unemploy-

<sup>1</sup> The notion of territorial capital defined by Camagni and Capello includes not only physical assets (private and public goods and resources), but also human, social, relational capital and cooperative networks. In this regard, this notion shares relevant theoretical concepts with neo-endogenous approaches to rural development in the section 3.2.

**Table 2.** Percentage of peripheral areas in European countries by types of driver and types of region (ESPON, 2017).

Types of region	A. Peripherality due to longer travel times from urban centres (%)	B. Peripherality due to poor access to services of general interest (%)	C. Peripherality due to lack of relational proximity and depleting processes
Urban regions	9.6%	18.8%	32.2%
Intermediate regions	48.6%	40.0%	34.1%
Rural regions	41.8%	41.2%	33.7%
Mountain regions	49.5%	38.2%	24.4%
Metropolitan regions	24.0%	23.0%	43.0%

Source: ESPON-PROFECY project. Noguera et al, 2017.

ment, decreasing wealth (GDP per capita) and further impact on out-migration.

Connection or disconnection can also be the result of poor governance of relations between urban and rural areas. New forms of territorial cooperation are emerging between rural and urban areas (rural-urban partnerships) to avoid over-exploitation and depletion of the rural assets (land, soil quality, water, amenities and landscape, ecosystem services, etc.) and foster the valorisation of complementary functions (Copus, 2010). Rural-urban interactions find very different governance solutions across the European countries (Wood and Haley, 2017). However, a series of obstacles hamper the cooperation: absence of trustful relationships, frictions between peripheral municipalities and the urban pole, power imbalances, inadequate financing and capacity constraints about personal and time resources (Oedl-Wieser et al., 2020).

### 3.2 From exogenous to neo-endogenous and networked models

In the 1970s' and part of the 1980s' rural development thinking was dominated by exogenous development models: rural areas were considered "backwards" and were thought to lack the dynamism of their own, be dependent on urban growth poles, external investment in agricultural modernisation, infrastructural connections, and the transfer of social and technological innovations from dynamic urban centres. Even scientific knowledge was conceived as a mere uptake of technologies produced elsewhere (Lowe et al., 2019). The main functions of rural areas were producing food and primary products for urban economies. This model was criticised mainly for fostering dependent development,

reliant on continued subsidies and policy decisions of distant institutions (Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019), for delegitimising local knowledge, and its negative social and environmental impacts (Lowe et al., 2019).

In the late 1980s' and 1990s, rural development theories were enriched by endogenous models, whose main principles were harnessing local potentials of its particular natural, human and cultural assets, including local knowledge and skills, for sustainable development; a territorial rather than sectoral approach, at a small scale; and finally, a focus on the needs, capacities and perspectives of local people (Ray, 1997). The primary function of rural areas was providing diversified activities in the local economies. The LEADER initiative relied on these principles and fully represented the most typical example of a policy instrument empowering people and endogenous potentials within the CAP. However, even this approach became quite simplistic, relying on assumptions of rural areas as self-sufficient and isolated from external forces (Lowe et al., 2019). Furthermore, LEADER experiences demonstrated problems of limited participation of marginal groups (unemployed and young people), the dominance of "*who are already powerful and....enjoy a greater capacity to act and to engage with the initiative*" (Shucksmith, 2000), and limited impact on social inclusion of the most vulnerable population. Finally, specific relevant policies such as the support to farming, public investments for infrastructures and general interest services, and taxation remain strongly exogenous in their design and delivery.

This evolution from the exogenous to neo-endogenous or networked approaches highlights the importance of social, economic, and institutional networks in regional economics and rural sociology/geography. Rural development approaches need to combine endogenous potentials with external forces in the context of a globalised economy, growing mobility of capital and people, substantial national reforms aimed at cutting public costs. Consequently, it was suggested that there is a need to go "*beyond exogenous and endogenous modes*" (Lowe et al., 1995) and focus on strategies that continue to valorise local assets in a multisectoral perspective but are also able to involve actively external actors. Some authors name this different perspective as "neo-endogenous approach" (Shucksmith, 2010 and 2012), but the family of neo-endogenous contributions embrace a series of theoretical frameworks focusing differently on relations and networks between rural actors (rural-rural), between rural and urban actors (rural-urban) or between rural and other relevant actors in the national and international context (rural-global market). These models are referred to in different ways.

The first example of the networked approach is within the “rural web” framework, defined as “*a complex of internally and externally generated interrelationships that shape the relative attractiveness of rural spaces, economically, socially, culturally and environmentally*” (Ploeg et al., 2008, p. vii). The web encompasses a series of multi-actor (including institutions, companies, state agencies, civil society, etc.) dynamic networks of a multilevel character (local and regional, which also influence the relations in other levels). The web also presents six theoretical dimensions (endogeneity, novelty production, sustainability, social capital, institutional arrangements and governance of markets). They can generate multifunctionality and intra-sectoral intertwinement if they interact correctly and thus contribute to the competitiveness of rural development processes.

Shucksmith (2012), Lowe et al. (2019) and Esparcia (2019) refer to a “*networked approach*” to rural development which seeks to link localities “*..into broader interwoven circuits of capital, power and expertise, such as rural professionals, regional agencies, NGOs, companies, universities and research institutes*”. They highlighted a vast number of networks in exploring the actors necessary for the setting-off, implementation and development of innovative projects in rural areas: actors involved in the scientific and technical support (provided by research centres, technical staff in government offices, certifying agencies, etc.), knowledge and information (on specific and technical and more generic issues, provided by a wide variety of public bodies), the physical infrastructure (needed for the everyday operation of the project, provided by public bodies, primarily local but, to a lesser extent, also national governments), organisation and marketing (provided by local governments, private organisations and NGOs), and finally implementation of regulatory standards (provided mainly by local and regional governments). Gkartzios and Lowe (2019) describe a series of “*hybrid neo-endogenous*” frameworks where local and extra-local agencies collaborate in rural governance and development processes, mentioning in particular: the role of universities in creating a research-practice rural network; the role of in-migrants in rural areas in terms of employment they might generate for locals, etc.

Copus (2010) outlines the importance of business networks in rural areas to transmit information and promote innovation. In these business networks, innovation depends, on the one side, on both the “*bridging capability*” to channel information from globally significant firms and, on the other side, the “*bonding capability*” to distribute them among the local firms and entrepreneurs. In other words, the role of business networks

depends not only upon their local network density, degree of embeddedness and human and social capital but upon their connections to more distant sources of specialist information. In analysing the process of knowledge creation within a geographic cluster, Bathelt et al. (2004) outline that this process relies on both information exchange and learning process within the cluster, achieved through informal day-by-day and face-to-face relations (the “buzz”), on the one side, and more complex channels used in distant interactions (the “pipelines”), on the other side. Finally, co-location and visibility generate potentials for efficient inter-personal translation of important news and information between actors and firms. In contrast, trans-local pipelines allow more information and news about the markets and technologies to be “pumped” into internal networks.

Recently, Bock (2016), focusing on the problems of promoting rural development in the marginal rural areas, outlined that these areas need more collaboration and linkages across space to give access to exogenous resources. In this regard, rural-urban linkages are essential, but broader connectivity and “*virtual proximity*” across the space are also relevant for remote rural areas. Collaborations with nationally operating large business and external companies, third sectors corporations like cooperative movements, the presence of temporary residents, etc., can activate social innovation processes at the local level, including “*the uptake of novel solutions developed elsewhere*” (Bock, 2016, p. 17). This can be necessary, especially in those marginal areas where mobilising citizens, NGOs, third sectors, and business is problematic because “*the local asset basis is too weak*” (Bock, 2016, p.17). Supporting networks in the most peripheral areas is necessary to reduce physical and socio-economic isolation or counterbalance restrictive fiscal policies dismantling regional institutional structures (Shucksmith, 2012). Bock calls this “*nexogenous approach*” to rural development since it emphasises the importance of reconnection and re-establishing socio-political connectivity, which allows for vitalisation if matched with endogenous forces.

Networks can work at different levels. For example, in a study on rural networks in UK, Miller and Wallace (2012) define a typology of rural networks based on the geographical remit: a) locally-based networks; b) national networks; c) networks that transcend both national and international regions. From the networks identified, those operating within a locality tended to focus mainly on rural issues, whereas national networks were more likely to work on issues affecting both rural and urban areas. Despite finding no substantive differences in why participants accessed rural networks, the three most



common reasons for using rural development networks were to obtain advice and information, identify sources of funding, and share local learning and experience. This implies that a lack of funding for rural development networks can have a detrimental effect on communities. Other examples of transnational networks can be found in LEADER (Dwyer et al., 2022): some Local Action Groups (LAGs) were able to promote innovative partnerships within the local area, but also supported the creation of transnational networks under the cooperation measures, lasting well beyond the project duration (as in numerous Italy-Austria transnational projects).

Other types of network, notably food-networks that go beyond the territory where productions are based, have been emphasised in other studies (Lamine et al., 2019; Lamine et al., 2012), identifying the linkages between collective brands, Geographical Indications (GIs) and alternative food networks, on the one side, and groups of urban consumers, on the other side. Some of these networks can transform into encompassing civil society organisations and broader territorial agri-food systems (see the case studies analysed in the Lamine et al. works). The variety of these networks depends upon the diversity of actors involved and their changing nature over time.

In conclusion, various studies confirm the increasing role of social, institutional and business networks in enabling connectivity between rural areas, adjacent urban areas and mainly beyond the geographical proximity. These networks can act as a factor complementary to (or maybe as a substitute for) agglomeration forces in peripheral rural areas<sup>2</sup>.

### 3.3 Clusters and localised systems

The concept of localised agri-food systems (LAFS) focused on the production system and interactions among firms within a given territory: this can explain why it was strongly influenced by the concept of cluster (Porter, 1990; Porter and Ketels, 2009), adopted by Porter to define the spatial proximity of many production units and their reciprocal relationships. Spatial proximity, specialisation of territorial systems and their complex interplay were also at the core of studies on the new economic geography in Krugman (1995), on one side, and in Becattini and his school focusing on the concept of Marshallian industrial district (Becattini et al.,

2009), on the other side. LAFS concept emerged in the mid-1990s and referred to geographical concentrations of specialised farms, food-processing units and distribution networks, private and public entities in a determined place. LAFS appeared in French literature as *Systèmes agro-alimentaires localisés* (SYAL) (CIRAD-SAR, 1996). Three distinctive features characterise LAFS: a) place, b) social relationships and c) institutions. The place is considered in its broadest meaning as used in the French school, “terroir”. Social relationships relate to trust and cooperation among actors. Institutions include all private and public agents promoting actions regulated by formal and informal rules. LAFS is “an agri-food system (production/transformation/services) in a specific territory in which actors try to set up coordination and collaboration processes in partnership terms, with internal management and regulation, but with strong ties to public managers and companies” (Torres Salcido and Muchnick, 2012). This definition outlines the capability of main actors to set up innovative and effective solutions to govern the system and ensure the participation of farmers, processors, services providers and marketing operators.

The contribution of LAFS’ approaches to the understanding of sustainable rural development mechanisms relies upon three aspects:

- a) there can be broad and intense economic and social linkages between the territorial agri-food systems and the rest of the local economy, as in the case of the bigger agri-food chains (e.g. the case of the processed tomato in North Italy) (Giacomini and Mancini, 2015; Mantino and Forcina, 2018);
- b) agri-food systems can have a relevant role in enhancing the local governance. In each LAFS, specific coordination methods can emerge, and governance arrangements to change production, processing and consumption practices and create alternative networks. Better local governance arrangements are supported by collective action that may take different forms and typologies of organisation. The OECD classical definition identifies three types of collective actions, based on the participants (OECD, 2013a): a) farm-led action; b) non-farm-led action; c) government-led action. In practice, multiple actors usually carry out collective action. A good start depends on a sufficiently large number of participants and the management capability of actors taking the lead in the process. Indeed, LAFS is a typical multi-actor situation where farmers are only a component, and the fundamental leading role can emerge either within the supply chain or civil society;
- c) finally, there are various cases of territorial alternative food networks in Europe (Lamine et al., 2019),

<sup>2</sup> This concept has been developed by Johansson and Quigley (2004, p. 175): “...small regions may survive and prosper – to the extent that networks can substitute for geographically proximate linkages, for local diversity in production and consumption, and for the spillouts of knowledge in dense regions”.

contributing to connecting small farmers and peripheral rural areas with urban/extra-local markets and ensuring new development perspectives.

### 3.4 *The role of institutions and public policies*

Public rural policies are an essential component of all rural development models. Moving from exogenous to neo-endogenous models implies the need for a differentiated use of policy instruments, decentralisation of policymaking, integration of multi-tiered institutions and sectors, participation of local stakeholders and more emphasis on investments in physical assets rather than mere subsidies. These were the main principles for a new territorial policy put forward by the New Rural Paradigm (NRP) for the OECD countries (OECD, 2006). The NRP was a turning point in the conceptualisation of the rural policy framework since it took on board the ongoing best practices coming from the OECD policy reviews in different countries (Mexico, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Greece, Germany, UK and Canada) and distilled the key lessons to foster rural development in the new millennium. According to the NRP, the LEADER initiative and other territorial approaches in Europe were recognised as success cases due to their innovative character and results, despite the relatively limited budget.

However, despite the increasing number of innovative experiences, policies implemented in rural areas have not achieved significant impacts. On the contrary, in the last decades, some authors included rural areas in the so-called “geography of discontent”, which includes rural population left behind by national public institutions, lacking faith in the future, and supporting anti-globalisation and populist movements/parties (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Thus, the OECD New rural paradigm needs to be updated, and today the debate on policies for rural areas needs to address three main questions: a) to what extent the place-based approach is effective and should be improved; b) what should be the role of public institutions in enabling/empowering local actors capacity building; c) which policy instruments should be set up to strengthening cooperation and networks (rural-rural, rural-urban and rural-wider markets). We are going to discuss point a) in 3.4.1 section and b) and c) in 3.4.2.

#### 3.4.1 Place-based policies and the CAP

The debate occurring in the late 1900s and first decade of the 2000s was dominated by two radical contrapositions between place-based and spatially-blind

(or generalised) policies, on the one side, and bottom-up and top-down approaches, on the other side. This debate strongly concerns the CAP since, in most rural areas, this policy also aims to cover inequalities between rural and urban areas, but in reality, CAP instruments, notably Pillar I, mainly address agricultural incomes. In a recent evaluation study of CAP impact on the balanced territorial objective (Schuh et al., 2020), the most important target groups proved to be farmers and rural young people. Only Pillar II instruments impact low skilled, unemployed people and the population in the most remote areas (Schuh et al., 2020, p. 84-88). According to respondents in the concerned case studies, pillar I instruments (primarily basic and green payments) are not designed to solve territorial needs, and they have controversial impacts. On the one hand, they favour large-scale farms or farms owners not actively involved in agricultural activities (Schuh et al., 2020, p. 90). On the other hand, they can have relevant income support effects in the less developed and marginalised rural areas and areas affected by the environmental and social crisis (e.g. the area hit by the plant pathogen *Xylella* in the Apulia region). In these areas, Pillar I instruments intervene as income transfers to mitigate the symptoms of economic backwardness and decline of farmers and family's incomes.

Within the CAP, Common Market Organisations (CMO) and rural development instruments seem more appropriate to remove farm structures' weaknesses and enhance competitiveness. Nevertheless, the effects on territorial disparities are uncertain and depend on local institutions and capacity building. For example, innovative approaches foster synergies between CAP instruments, reducing intra-sectoral income disparities and strengthening cooperation in the supply chain (Schuh et al., 2020). This happened in agri-industrial districts that were able to combine schemes targeting specialised production with more generalised CAP instruments (e.g. operational programmes for COM producers).

LEADER is the most typical example of place-based approach within the CAP. Despite the LEADER broader scope in the last programming period (through the adoption of a multi-fund approach), two recent evaluation reports (Schuh et al., 2020; Dwyer et al., 2022) indicate that rural peripheral regions need more robust national policies than LEADER and more diversified supporting systems to face the lack of services of general interest and shortage of employment opportunities. Due to the small budget share (5% of the rural development programmes), LEADER can only provide impulses at the local level. Still, LEADER can generate higher social and economic impact when working alongside other nation-

al/regional schemes. Similar impacts have been reported in some Spanish and Italian rural areas, whereby linkages occurred with national programmes for depopulated areas<sup>3</sup>.

These case studies provide relevant lessons on place-based policy's effectiveness: the need for combining different types of policies under a common territorial approach. This result has two relevant methodological implications: a) first, to overcome the traditional dichotomy between spatially-blind (or people-based) and place-based development policies and adopt what Iammarino et al. (2018) call "*place-sensitive development policy approach*", whereby agglomeration effects are promoted in as many places as possible through a mix of policy instruments; b) second, to reconcile top-down and bottom-up policies in a "joint" meso-level conceptual framework (Iammarino et al., 2018; Crescenzi and Rodriguez-Pose, 2011). Empirical evidence shows that social marginalisation and low local development opportunities render many place-based policies ineffective and often make them frequently function more as social rather than economic development policies achieving inter-territorial equity. Within a broader perspective, even the World Bank has advocated the need for reconciling policies to enhance institutions, infrastructures, and local interventions, but the right policy mix depends on the types and intensities of interregional disparities (World Bank, 2009).

### 3.4.2 The role of public institutions in empowering local actors, capacity building and networks

The quality of institutions plays a crucial role in the development processes. Recent research has demonstrated that weak institutions represent a crucial obstacle to the effective use of European Cohesion policies (Rodriguez-Pose and Garcilazo, 2015) and undermine the capacity to innovate (Rodriguez-Pose and Di Cataldo, 2015). Weak institutions imply ineffective regional and local governments, low efficiency in managing public programmes, limits in accountability and voice, and generation of rent-seeking positions, corruption, and lack of confidence in the future. In reality, the quality of institutions also includes the capability to enable local actors and communities "*to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes*" (Steiner,

2016). This capability is crucial for two reasons: a) to create an enabling policy environment for community-led initiatives; b) to allow new institutions and groups to emerge in less active places and facilitate the taking action to address social, economic and environmental challenges (Shucksmith, 2012). In other words, enabling policies should help local actors and communities to develop and support resilience (Markantoni et al., 2018). Nevertheless, public bodies remain in most cases unavailable, if not hostile, to these local needs, creating "a not supportive environment" that generate policy barriers in accessing public funding by "hard to reach" communities (Celata and Coletti, 2018).

Many authors outline that local development programmes usually are distributed unevenly across rural areas since the most experienced communities come forward and become increasingly empowered, while others fall further behind (Markantoni et al., 2018). Marginalised communities are less ready to participate in local development processes "*unless explicit attention is given to their inclusion*" (Shucksmith, 2012) and that communities with well-established partnerships and networks are more successful at obtaining funds. In these contexts, we call enabling policies those policies explicitly addressing "*hard to reach*" communities and providing financial, technical, and animation support. A good example of enabling policy is the programme funded in Scotland, *Capacity for Chance* (C4C), under the LEADER funds, since it provides financial support to selected communities that usually do not engage due to lack of human, economic and relational capital. For these reasons, the programme does not require finding match-funding but simply local people voluntary support and offers the support of a project manager to assist the communities in developing their selected projects (Markantoni et al., 2018; Steiner, 2016). This study emphasises how the national, regional and local institutions need to set up rules, organisation and behaviours consistently empowering local actors.

Other examples come from a recent evaluation study of the LEADER implementation in Europe (Dwyer et al., 2022). An enabling environment for the LEADER implementation is determined by two conditions: a) first, reducing the administrative complexity and enhancing coordination, especially in a multi-fund environment (as it happens when all European Funds support LEADER) through a clear definition of tasks and roles between responsible authorities of programme implementation and local agencies; b) establishing a collaborative and mutual learning process between LAGs and programme authorities, through actions such as guidelines, manuals, websites, FAQ sessions, working groups, regular communications and meetings, formal collaborations (for-

<sup>3</sup> These programmes are the National Strategy for Inner Areas in Italy and the regional Strategy against depopulation in Castilla-La Mancha region (Spain). For more details on these programmes see Barca et al., 2014 and Schuh et al., 2020. More recently, these two policies have been presented in a webinar organised by the European Rural Development Network in Brussels (Mantino, 2021; Martinez Arroyo, 2021).



malised in joint committees including local agencies). These conditions are mainly promoted by the public administration bodies.

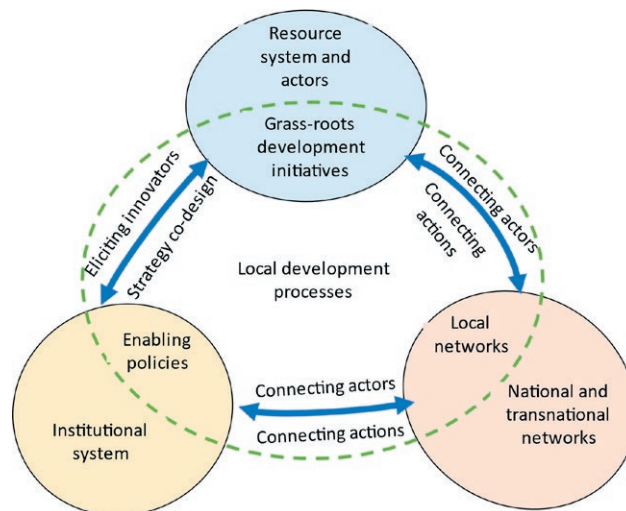
Regarding networks, the impact of public policies upon networks gained low attention in policy analysis. The need for supporting networks as a specific policy objective is only gradually shaping rural development strategies. In the last decade the attention is much focused on setting up either “networks of networks” (e.g. through funding the European Network of Rural Development and the National Rural Networks) or trans-national networks. It is the case of many cooperation projects supported by transnational cooperation programmes, both within Cohesion policy and the LEADER instrument. Still, many obstacles and institutional barriers undermine their effectiveness (Dwyer et al., 2022).

On the contrary, there is a broad spectrum of studies measuring the influence of networks upon policy design, but some authors highlighted the capacity of rural networks to engage in lobbying activities, providing voice and keeping rural issues on the political agenda (regionally and nationally) (Lamine et al., 2019; Miller and Wallace, 2012; Dwyer et al., 2022).

#### 4. TRANSLATING RECENT ACHIEVEMENTS INTO A DIFFERENT OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK

To translate different disciplinary developments into a practical and integrated conceptual approach, we can borrow from the triple helix formalised to study regional learning and innovation (Wellbrook et al., 2012). The model interpreting learning and innovation processes has to be adapted according to the main concepts drawn by our previous analysis. Thus, local development processes can be conceived as the result of what happens in three main domains: local resource systems, networks, enabling institutions and policies (Figure 2). The central dotted circle represents how the specific components of the three domains and how they interact in influencing the local development processes.

The first component includes the territorial resource system, the different actors and their specific capabilities that bring about grassroots development initiatives. According to Wellbrook et al. (2012), “the [territory]... can thus be regarded as an arena which comprises diverse actors and their different grassroots activities” (p. 6). Identifying the concept of territory is a crucial step in this framework. Following Camagni and Capello (2013), we can use a notion of a “system of localised production activities, traditions, skills and know-how”, based on



**Figure 2.** The triple helix model (Wellbrook et al., 2012), adapted to understand local development processes.

“cultural elements and values which attribute sense and meaning to local practices and structures and define local identities” (p. 1387). In practice, this component identifies the physical and human capital underpinning neo-endogenous development in a rural area, focusing on innovative designing and implementing local projects. When designing schemes to support new initiatives, this framework envisages a sort of inventory of local resources and existing initiatives.

The second component is the “institutional system”, which encompasses a series of public, semi-public and private institutions managing policies for the rural territory and undertaking different tasks (planning, organising, directing, coordinating, monitoring and evaluation). We include in the institutional system the bodies operating at national and regional level, and also institutional actors and rules set up at local level and aiming to deliver EU, national and regional policy instruments to the rural area. Even in this case we replaced the Wellbrook et al. string “Supporting Policies” with “Enabling Policies” that, in our opinion, has a more pro-active meaning. Thus, more than providing financial and administrative support, “enabling policies” for local actors imply at least three other conditions (see figure 2):

- a) supporting local development strategies through co-design, whereby public administration or other agencies collaborate with local stakeholders to define long-term actions and possible funding, especially in the areas lacking resources and human capabilities. In these areas, poor access to development policies is strongly correlated to the lack of human capital and poor networks;

- b) eliciting innovators to emerge and participate in actions' design and implementation. In the most peripheral areas, conservative groups and socially dominant coalitions often do not allow innovators to voice alternative needs and access policy support. This is detrimental for them to introduce social innovation and get opportunities to play a role in the future of the area;
- c) finally, connecting actions and actors, by promoting intersectoral and multi-actor initiatives in the area, either by valorising the current networks or creating new ones.

The third component of the local processes in figure 2 concerns the different types of networking activities. By replacing the string “knowledge support structure”, we have adapted the Wellbrook et al. conceptual framework, since networks gained more relevance in the literature concerning more general rural development processes. They include a set of geographical proximity relations (within the rural territory) and “organised proximity” (with distant areas/business systems). Both can generate localised collective learning processes and can be identified as relational capital in Camagni and Capello (2013) definition of territorial capital.

We can further expand the model to include a fourth helix as the new technologies have become more relevant in recent decades. Looking at the model represented in figure 2, external actors or local innovators as providers of internal and tacit knowledge can introduce and develop new technologies in the area. Local and national/international networks can play a relevant role in both cases. New technologies can also be fostered by enabling policies through the institutional system (private and public research and experimental bodies, advisors, trainers, etc.). Public policies have supported digital and broadband infrastructures through regional and rural development incentives and financial resources addressed to peripheral rural areas. In many rural areas, especially the most peripheral, inadequate broadband infrastructures hamper networks and distant market relations. In conclusion, new technologies represent a relevant development factor, but they can enter the model and be diffused in the rural context through different modes.

Local development processes are the result of both the action of each component and of interactions among them. For example, evidence suggests that an enabling policy environment foster grassroots initiatives and new networks, notably at the local level and sometimes (and less evidently) with more distant networks. Vice versa, good grassroots initiatives and local networks can inspire and facilitate a good use of existing policies. It is

worth noticing that good local governance is a fundamental ingredient ensuring successful supporting policies, autonomous grassroots initiatives and dense local networks (Mantino and Vanni, 2019).

This conceptual framework can provide a practical outline for development projects at the local scale. A similar framework has been adopted in co-design processes of local strategies in Italy, within the national programme for Inner Areas aiming to support integrated initiatives in the most depopulated areas. The programme entails activating the three components in setting up initiatives through the participation of local actors through: a) an inventory of available infrastructure and service gaps, existing needs and initiatives aiming to overcome these gaps; b) an analysis of policy mix needed to support initiatives in the field of services of general interest and development of local sectors; c) deep and comprehensive scouting of innovators and potential networks to be involved in the project co-design processes. An essential condition for the success of the strategy design is formal governance arrangements signed by partnerships of local municipalities that ensure cooperation among the relevant local institutions (Barca et al., 2014). The Inner Areas approach can solve another relevant failure in the rural development initiatives (World Bank, 2009), that is the appropriate mix of policies addressed to people (education, healthcare, and mobility of population) and policies addressed to places (infrastructures, incentives to economic activities, etc.). This mix allows to strengthen the impact of place-based policies through the support of more general policies, usually falling under the category of macro-economic policies.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND POLICY

The analysis carried out in this article acknowledges a gap between the unfolding of local development processes and the current representation of rural diversity by international organisations and national/regional authorities. This gap is influenced by two relevant factors: a) high heterogeneity in terms of recent and accepted methods and definition criteria of rural diversity; b) a vision of rural areas as strongly dependent on the sphere of influence of urban areas.

In the last two decades, a series of studies, mainly supported by the European Commission (HORIZON, ESPON, evaluation studies, etc.), provided a more complex and diversified vision of rural diversity, regarding theoretical models and practical definitions. Moving from a simplistic definition of rural development



processes to more complex frameworks implies taking account of the contribution of different disciplines. New concepts can be drawn from comparative analysis: 1) rural diversity cannot be explained exclusively by agglomeration forces and geographical distance from urban centres; b) multiple functions of rural areas, often rooted into sustainable agri-food systems or other forms of territorial capital, contribute to explain more autonomous roles of rural areas; c) “organised” or “relational proximity” is emerging in a context of a globalised economy and non-geographical networks, as a critical factor of connection between rural areas and distant regions/markets. Thus, the definition of rural peripherality is changing accordingly. Likewise, the dichotomy between exogenous and endogenous models is losing its interpretative appeal, and networks models are gaining interest among rural development scholars.

Which implications do these research achievements get in the directions of future research? First, they call for moving from a functional model to another approach based on the territorial capital endowments of rural areas, whereby territorial capital also includes different forms of “relational capital” and networks. In practice, this requires a detailed analysis of territorial capital variables and deep scouting of relations within the locality and between the locality and markets.

Second, there is a need for developing a rural area concept by revising the current urban-rural typology and introducing criteria based on the variety of functions that rural areas play in the socio-economic and environmental context (ESPON, 2021). The Direction of Agriculture and Rural Development of EC is emphasising this need (Migas and Zarzycky, 2020), but there is also a need to fill persistent data gaps at the correct geographical scale (local in many cases) through the cooperation between different data providers and screening a wide range of possible (including new) data sources beyond conventional indicators such as population density and settlement configuration.

Third, understanding rural diversity across European regions has to be used to read better the dynamics of megatrends, including climate change, environmental crises, and socio-economic and demographic drivers of change. The Commission’s Megatrends Hub has identified fourteen global megatrends, and its Strategic Foresight Report (European Commission, 2020a) provides a preliminary systematic analysis of resilience, but we need a significant focus on how different rural areas can face megatrends. In this regard, Bock and Krzysztofowicz (2021) have contributed to the long-term vision for rural areas by drawing four types of scenarios through the combination of diverse future developments rang-

ing from demography and multilevel governance to climate change, economic development and digitalisation (rururbanities, rural renewal, rural connections and rural specialisation).

Within the possible megatrends, particular attention deserves the digital transition as a powerful driver of technological innovation. Digitalisation connected with artificial intelligence (AI), big data, and automation can potentially reshape the economy, which will represent a threat and an opportunity for rural areas. Technology can be a way of overcoming economic disadvantages, notably for rural areas with a shrinking population. New communication technologies can limit the effect of distance. Digital infrastructures will be crucial to facilitate connection, integration, and provision of e-services (e.g. administration, health, education, finance, culture) and enable the digitalisation of agriculture and the bioeconomy (e.g. precision farming, automation). These investments do not require only covering infrastructural needs but also grass-roots initiatives by local communities under the form of “Smart Villages projects” (European Commission, 2020b). This approach encourages rural areas and communities to develop projects, build on their existing strengths and assets, and develop decentralised services, energy solutions, and digital technologies and innovations.

Another relevant question concerns to what extent the current policy framework fits local development needs of the different rural areas. The recent Communication of the European Commission on “A long-term Vision for the EU’s Rural Areas” (LTVRA) (EC, 2021) seeks to provide new answers to increasing territorial disparities and the feeling of left behind characterising most rural areas. But, as it was emphasised in the analysis of policies, place-based policy approach is used only for a marginal share of the CAP. To be more effective, territorial lens need to be applied to a mix of different policies, including CAP instruments other than LEADER and cooperation measures. The 2021-27 reform of the CAP offered the opportunities of mixing different instruments in the CAP Strategic Plan (CSP) to prompt sustainable and integrated rural development. Nevertheless, the opportunity to address territorial differences within the CSP and implement a broader place-based approach does not seem realistic, given the dominant visions in the agricultural policies and the traditional barriers and *silos* between the two CAP Pillars.

As part of the Better Regulation Agenda, the LTVRA puts in place a *Rural Proofing* mechanism, notably to assess the anticipated impact of major EU legislative initiatives on rural areas. It will be based on territorial impact assessments and a better monitoring of the

situation of rural areas. The way in which rural areas are integrated in the EU's policies will be monitored, notably through regular reports on the implementation of relevant policies. *Rural Proofing* will mean putting more attention to territorial distribution of EU policies before their implementation and potential impacts. This mechanism can become an interesting innovation whether reproduced at national level, but this will strongly rely on political positions of the agricultural world.

A further relevant challenge concerns enabling all individuals to take active part in policy and decision-making processes, involving a broad range of stakeholders and networks as well as all levels of governance. The methodological framework proposed here seeks to activate a process that elicit endogenous capital and innovators through the empowerment of local communities and an enabling policy environment, notably in most peripheral and depopulated rural areas. These types of rural areas need a rather different approach to local development, whereby local institutions and innovators work alongside with regional and transnational actors, and public administrations as well. The provision of public funds is not sufficient to overcome the different obstacles, since empowering local communities requires a radical change in public institutions' objectives, instruments and behaviour. In this regard the contribution of researchers and scholars should be more oriented to multi-actor action research methods, notably in marginalised rural areas and grassroots initiatives by rural communities.

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