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# Rural development policies and programmes in support of rural women the Italian experience

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**Abstract.** In recent times the role played by women in rural development has been given an ever increasing attention, culminating in the insertion of specific measures in Agenda 2000. The EU programs for rural development aim at singling out the factors handicapping the full participation of women in the public and economic life at local level and at developing specific initiatives for this category. The Italian State, in agreement with the EU Commission and by means of Structural Funds, in particular the European Social Fund (ESF), plays an important role in reducing inequality among men and women in matters of employment, thus enforcing the so-called mainstreaming.

**Keywords.** Rural development – Funding - Training programmes – Networks – European Union – Italy.

## ***Politiques et programmes de développement en faveur des femmes rurales. L'expérience italienne***

**Résumé.** Ces dernières années, on a accordé une attention spéciale au rôle des femmes dans le développement rural et de ce fait, des mesures spécifiques ont été avancées et incluses dans l'Agenda 2000. L'objectif des programmes de l'UE pour le développement rural est de cerner les facteurs qui entravent la pleine participation des femmes à la vie publique et économique à l'échelle sociale et de promouvoir des initiatives particulières pour ces catégories. Le gouvernement italien, de concert avec la Commission Européenne et à l'aide des Fonds Structurels, notamment le Fonds Social Européen (FSE), s'est engagé considérablement dans la réduction des disparités entre hommes et femmes dans l'emploi et dégage tous les efforts possibles pour renforcer l'intégration du genre.

**Mots-clés.** Développement rural – Financement – Programmes de formation – Réseaux – Union Européenne – Italie.

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## **I – Introduction**

Increasing attention has been paid in recent years to the problem of the role of women in rural development, resulting in the insertion of special measures in Agenda 2000.

Programmes for rural development aim at identifying the constraints on women's full participation in local public and economic life and at developing specific initiatives in favour of women. In particular, Reg. 1257/99 and subsequent implementation regulations define the strategies and objectives of the new rural development policy oriented towards integrated, sustainable development (multi-functionality, efficiency and coordination of action) and aim at creating jobs in such a way as to guarantee better use of existing human resources, not least promoting equal opportunities for women.

The aim of this paper is to assess the outcome of EU and Italian policy trends in terms of employment and/or supplementary income for women in agriculture, investigating in particular certain aspects of farm management by women. The research intends to emphasise the importance of the various contributions of women to rural development.

## II – Women and rural development in Europe: from antiquity to modern times

Since the dawn of European history women's productive activities have been primarily directed towards the maintenance and growth of nuclear families and their respective communities. An important part of these activities has centred on the domestic sphere where they have produced goods and food and where labour power has been reproduced. Food processing, the making of clothing and tools, carrying water, gathering wood, keeping the fire burning, caring for domestic animals, selling agricultural or handmade products in local markets, raising children, preparing and administering remedies and medicines, cleaning, etc., constitute productive labours without which no human group can reproduce itself or prosper. These conditions have a particular impact on precapitalist societies, where production and kinship are profoundly interwoven. In these circumstances the majority of women were exploited simultaneously in both their working and reproductive capacity. The product of their labour and their body was controlled by a husband, a father, a guardian or employer. Management and control were, in general, in the hands of men, via the marital or parental bond or by means of the dependence which was reinforced by the public and political position of men.

Throughout history women have been in charge of maintaining and reproducing these domestic units by means of their labour, time and skill. Women's domestic labour has not been regarded as it actually was, but rather as a fundamental part of their «virtue» as women. Their «virtue» has been essential for the family. Their «virtue» has been the key to the well-being of society.

A landed holding without a woman is unthinkable. No man can take on the running of one if he doesn't have a woman in his house. However, working in the countryside has almost always seemed like an extension of domestic work and thus formed part of women's «natural» activities. It is certainly difficult to separate them. As stated above, production and kinship are intimately linked in precapitalist societies, and agricultural duties were an integral part of the home.

Recently, European policy makers have expressed an increased interest in issues related to women's contribution and presence in agriculture. The latest Eurostat indicators reveal that women make up 37% of the EU agricultural workforce. Rural women play a crucial role in agriculture since they are able to satisfy the need for agricultural multifunctionality that is being promoted by EU rural development policies and programmes. The choice of quality or food safety-oriented productions, family labour and the capacity of reconciling work and family responsibilities are indeed a clear example of multifunctionality.

Women's contribution to agriculture is thus fundamental for the socio-economic development of rural areas. They are extensively involved in agriculture as female farm heads, co-owners, family farm workers and also employees. 38% of family workers in agriculture are women. But, although their contribution to local and community development is significant, their role still goes unnoticed and they are still not fully involved in decision-making. Moreover, many of them don't even receive an income since their work is considered integral part of the family income. This is partly due to their multiple roles and workload, but also to the persistence of traditional views about women's and men's roles in society. Indeed, marriage in the agricultural sector means the effective involvement of women in agriculture without their official recognition as agricultural workers or farm managers.

Rural population ageing is another crucial issue to take into account. Indeed, 19% of the female workforce are aged over 65, and this rate reaches higher percentages (27 to 37%) in the Mediterranean area.

Therefore, a basic priority is to encourage young women to contribute to the agricultural sector. In this regard, government institutions should introduce effective measures to support and develop

female entrepreneurship by encouraging women to undertake rural entrepreneurial activities and find effective tools to improve farm efficiency. Rural development entails the expansion into new sectors, the development of alternative activities in order to create new job opportunities particularly for young women who otherwise can decide to migrate.

The development of agritourism activities, concerning the handmade production of food products and beverages or environment improvement, demonstrate the capacity of women to significantly contribute to the diversification of rural areas and to consolidate the European model of multifunctional agriculture.

In such a context, all services supporting female entrepreneurship play a key role. Information, training and adequate professional re-qualification are thus of utmost importance. But to acquire professional skills women need a specific training in a sector where usually they don't have the time for such activity due to many work and family duties to carry out. As previously mentioned, work-family conciliation is a very old issue that today has become one of the «hottest» topics in all economic sectors, especially agriculture, where this represents one of the major constraints that prevent women from undertaking managerial roles.

Thus, measures should be taken to emphasize the ability of women to reconcile work and family life which is one of the main and typical features characterizing women in agriculture.

### III – Gender equality in EU policies and planning

With the European Union programmes for rural development that give primary importance to improving the economic and social condition of rural men and women, and particularly to ensuring them equal opportunities, gender issues in agriculture and rural development are becoming high on the governments' agenda. The challenge for rural development programmes is to identify the constraints on women's full participation in economic and public life at local level, and to develop specific initiatives in their favour.

These programmes are particularly directed towards diversification and strengthening of the economic fabric of rural areas, the possibility of promoting entrepreneurship and creating employment and/or supplementary income, for women as well, the exploitation of local resources (quality products, local ecological potential, workforce), and the full involvement of women and young people in the agricultural sector.

European Union programmes have already provided significant backing to developments in rural areas that have benefited women. The most significant actions include: i) **Regs. 1257/99 and 1260/99**, which define the strategies and objectives of the new rural development policy (multi-functionality, multi-sector approach, efficiency and coordination of action, application of new measures, etc.) and aim, among other things, at creating new jobs, so as to guarantee better use of existing human resources and promote equal opportunities for men and women; ii) **Leader+** initiative for rural development, in which an improvement in job opportunities and/or the creation of jobs for the young and women is an EU priority and contributes towards improving the conditions of women in rural areas by providing incentives for the development of new activities and sources of employment; iii) **NOW** (New Opportunities for Women) EU employment initiative that has been widely used to support training, employment creation and enterprise support projects for rural women.

National and regional action is also moving in this direction: the planning of action for agriculture and rural development in EU countries aims at exploiting local resources and providing favourable conditions for training and the development of production activities, also involving workers not directly connected with the agricultural sector. The development of the entrepreneurial spirit is

considered indispensable for the creation of new jobs and to increase education, training and the possibility of reconciling work and family life.

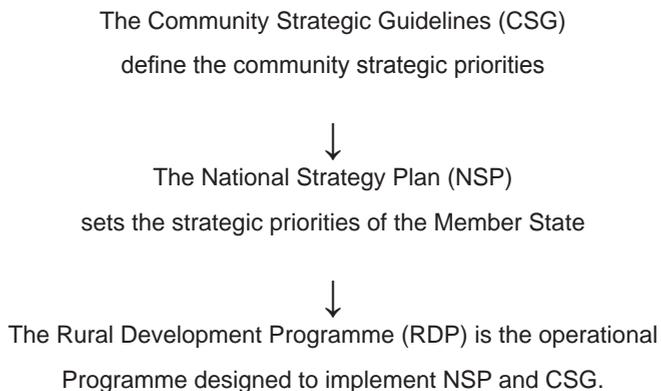
## IV – The rural development policy 2007-2013

The objectives of the EU rural development policy - also known as the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) – focus on the enhancement of the social and economic cohesion, on the improvement of competitiveness in farming and forestry sectors, and on the amelioration of the environment aiming at landscape conservation and sustainable development.

The European Union action in favour of the rural world combines national policies implemented by each Member State, in a framework of subsidiarity, additionality of resources, partnership and participation of the various stakeholders.

How is it implemented in Europe?

Regarding the programming period 2007-2013, the European Union has adopted a so-called «multi-level» approach, including: Community Strategic Guidelines, National Strategy Plan and Rural Development Programme.



*How is it implemented in Italy?*

The Italian Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies (Mipaaf) has developed a National Strategy Plan (NSP) that is the outcome of consultations, partnerships and negotiations with the major institutional, economic and social actors. It identifies four strategic priorities in line with the Community Strategic Guidelines:

1. Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector;
2. Improving the environment and the countryside;
3. Improving quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy;
4. Leader approach.

The strategy as defined by the NSP is carried out through 21 Rural Development Programmes (RDP), managed by each Italian Region and Autonomous Province, and through the National Rural Network Programme, which is under Mipaaf direct management with the support of the Monitoring Committee of which ONILFA is member. Each RDP consists of 4 Axes, corresponding to the strategic priorities set in the NSP. The total available resources amount to Euro 16,687

billion, of which 8,292 billion are funded by the EU through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

## **V – Women and rural development in Italy**

### **1. Socio-demographic features of rural women**

Italy has one of the lowest employment rates for women (42,0%) as compared with the European average (55,6%). In addition, an unemployment rate of 12,2% as compared with an EU average of 8.8%, confirms Italy's position as a late developer in the EU.

It should be pointed out that the progressive deregulation of the labour market and the high unemployment rates in certain European countries in the '90s led to the introduction of policies and legislative measures to support entrepreneurship, mainly aiming at reducing the barriers to setting up self-employed business (simplification of procedures, reduction of the costs involved in setting up new businesses, easier access to credit, improvement of social security services for self-employed workers, etc.) and promoting entrepreneurial capacities.

Some of the measures adopted address exclusively the insertion of young people and women in enterprise.

In Italy, Law 215/92 introduced measures to support the creation and development of female enterprises, including cooperative businesses, training and qualification, access to credit, and the promotion of enterprises in innovative sectors.

According to the ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics) data of 2003, women manage 17.3% of Utilized Agricultural Area (UAA) and 27.3% of farms all over Italy. That means that from 1999 (see Fig. 1) to 2003 there has been a slight increase in the number of women-run farms (from 26.3 to 27.3%), and even if this percentage is still low as compared to men, their number is increasing. This confirms women's will to gradually assume a role as juridical-economic farm managers.

Rural population ageing is one of the main constraints affecting rural development. Indeed, in agriculture there is a high percentage of women in the age class 35-54 (59.4%), a small percentage of 15-34-year-old women (22.9%), while women over 50 total 33.9%. On the contrary, in the industrial and service sectors, there is a higher percentage of young women in the age class 15 to 34 (39.2%) and a lower percentage of women over 50 (17.8%).

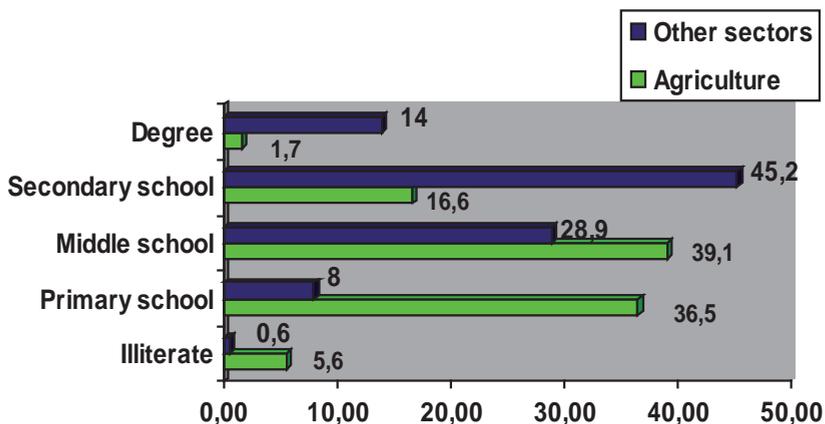
Most of the times the level of education of women occupied in the agricultural sector is lower than the national average. According to the ISTAT data of 2001, 5.6% of rural women didn't get any certificate, 36.5% have a primary education certificate, 16.6% have a secondary school certificate, and only 1.7% possess a university degree. These data show that women in the agricultural sector are much less educated than those occupied in other sectors, but at the same time reveal that their level of education is almost the same as men's (see figures 3 and 4).

**Table 1. Number of farms, Total Surface Area and Utilized Agricultural Area (UAA) broken down by sex in the years 1990, 1998 and 1999**

| Farm Managers          | Year          |               |               | Year       |            |            |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------|------------|------------|
|                        | 1990          | 1998          | 1999          | 1990       | 1998       | 1999       |
|                        | thousands     |               |               | %          |            |            |
| <i>FARMS</i>           |               |               |               |            |            |            |
| Male                   | 1.998         | 1.701         | 1.674         | 75         | 74         | 73.7       |
| Female                 | 667           | 599           | 596           | 25         | 26         | 26.3       |
| <b>TOTAL</b>           | <b>2.665</b>  | <b>2.300</b>  | <b>2.270</b>  | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> |
| <i>TOTAL AREA (ha)</i> |               |               |               |            |            |            |
| Male                   | 18.361        | 16.784        | 16.899        | 85.5       | 83.1       | 83.8       |
| Female                 | 3.105         | 3.413         | 3.265         | 14.5       | 16.9       | 16.2       |
| <b>TOTAL</b>           | <b>21.466</b> | <b>20.197</b> | <b>20.164</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> |
| <i>UAA (ha)</i>        |               |               |               |            |            |            |
| Male                   | 12.706        | 12.425        | 12.454        | 85         | 83         | 83         |
| Female                 | 2.241         | 2.541         | 2.543         | 15         | 17         | 17         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>           | <b>14.947</b> | <b>14.966</b> | <b>14.997</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> |

**Table 2. Percentage of women in agriculture and other sectors broken down by age group for the year 2001**

| AGE GROUP    | Agriculture  | Other sectors |
|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| 15-19        | 0.8          | 1.2           |
| 20-24        | 3.7          | 7.5           |
| 25-29        | 7.5          | 14.1          |
| 30-34        | 10.9         | 16.4          |
| 35-39        | 14.2         | 16.4          |
| 40-44        | 14.6         | 14.3          |
| 45-49        | 14.4         | 12.3          |
| 50-54        | 16.2         | 9.9           |
| 55-59        | 11.0         | 5.0           |
| 60-64        | 4.0          | 1.9           |
| 65 and over  | 2.7          | 1.0           |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>100.0</b> | <b>100.0</b>  |



**Figure 1. Percentage of women in agriculture and other sectors broken down by level o education (ISTAT 2001)**

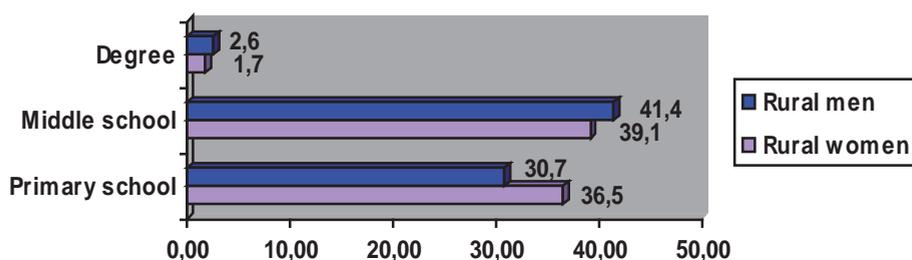


Figure 2. Percentage of women and men occupied in agriculture broken down by level of education (ISTAT 2001)

Table 3. Percentage of women occupied in agriculture and other sectors broken down by work hours (ISTAT 2001)

| WORK HOURS   | Agriculture  | Other sectors |
|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| none         | 10.0         | 6.5           |
| less than 12 | 5.3          | 3.2           |
| 12-24        | 13.7         | 18.0          |
| 25-35        | 16.1         | 13.4          |
| 36-40        | 30.1         | 46.6          |
| 40 and over  | 24.8         | 12.3          |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>100.0</b> | <b>100.0</b>  |

As shown in Fig. 5 rural women work longer hours than the other female workers. According to the ISTAT data of 2001, 24.8% of women occupied in agriculture work more than 40 hours/week, and this percentage is much higher than that of women occupied in other sectors (12.3); only 27.5% work part-time and 72.2 women out of 100 work full-time. Thus, it is clear that rural women are able to combine household chores with their occupation, and although gender equality has not been fully achieved yet, women's empowerment continues to grow also thanks to the fact that the roles within the family structure are intensively interchanged by each member.

## 2. Diversification and multifunctionality in women-run farms

The majority of women-run farms are effective, innovative and dynamic, but the real characteristic featuring them is their orientation towards diversification and multifunctionality.

Diversification refers to the use of the land and of the other farm's primary inputs (capital, labour) to produce goods and services not directly related with the primary sector, such as tourist, recreational, educational and therapeutic activities. Traditional forms of diversification away from agriculture include, for example, on-farm processing; direct marketing of farm products, and agro-tourism. The diversification process can then lead to exiting from agriculture, that is to a complete deactivation in the agricultural enterprise of the agricultural production function.

A second type of adjustment that farms are undergoing refers to the activation of functions different from the productive one, such as ecological, social (cultural diversity and heritage conservation, positive contributions to the viability of rural areas) and economic (spill over effects of agriculture on other economic activities, for example on tourism) functions.

In other words the farm becomes multifunctional. The concept of multifunctionality relies on the recognition that agriculture, in addition to producing food and fibres, also produces a wide range of non-market goods and services, shapes the environment, affects social and cultural

systems and contributes to economic growth. The conservation of environmental, cultural and social values traditionally produced by the agricultural sector is increasingly demanded by urban dwellers. The two main forces driving this growth in demand for goods and services different from food and fibers are

1. a greater awareness of the value attached to the environmental and social functions;
2. the growing concern for their increasing scarcity, arising from the shrinking role played by agriculture in the rural areas and from the mounting pressures of urbanization on rural traditions and way of life, and of anthropic activities on the natural ecosystems.

Differently from diversification that may lead to exiting from agriculture, the adoption of multifunctional practices strengthens, deepens the agricultural production function of farms.

Sustainability and quality of life are thus two fundamental principles rural women want to respect. It is well known that rural women play a significant role in food safety and biodiversity conservation. Indeed, when evaluating a crop women take into account not only its market value but also its organoleptic and gastronomic properties as well as their family's food needs.

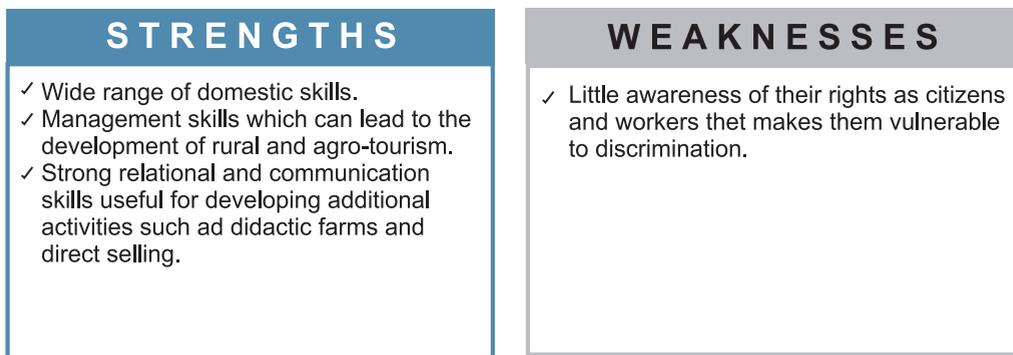


Figure 4. Rural women's main strengths and weaknesses

### A. Didactic farms

Didactic farms constitute one of the several aspects of farm multifunctionality, as well as a possible income-generating activity.

Didactic farms are intended to educate future consumers on food and environment through the valorization of the agricultural resources. They receive food and environmental education, being made acquainted with the local produce, the relation between food and environment, food and health, as well as with environmental sustainability. Visiting a didactic farm represents a great opportunity for children, young people and students to know their own environment from a cultural and productive point of view, being directly involved in agriculture and livestock activities. They are also made acquainted with the cultural, historic, environmental, and gastronomic traditions of the territory, and are given the chance to participate in a wide range of practical and theoretical activities through some didactic material, such as posters, pictures, DVDs and other digital supports concerning aspects of rural life, local history and agricultural and zootechnic activities.

#### *Pedagogic approach*

Through the pedagogic approach young students are given the opportunity to:

- Learn through practical activities, teamwork, and direct field experiences (seeding, harvesting, produce processing, etc..);
- Enter into contact with the animal and vegetal life, learning to respect them;
- Be responsible for their own health and environment, and valorize daily work;
- Be acquainted with agriculture and its activities and relevant aspects, such as cultivation and breeding systems, nature's cycles, organoleptic features of food, energy production, sustainable development, and the importance of food safety.

#### *Main objectives*

- Improve the relation between urban and rural areas;
- Stimulate students' interest in discovering the environment and the agricultural activity;
- Further the recovery of the environmental and cultural value of one's own territory;
- Emphasise and acknowledge the social role and the importance of agriculture;
- Sensitize people towards environmental respect;
- Make people acquainted with the origin of food products;
- Educate future consumers by making them aware of the existing relations between productive systems, food consumption and environmental protection; and
- Explain food processing.

#### **B. Direct selling**

The real strength featuring rural women is their ability to process agricultural products. Their century-old experience as women, mothers and wives living and working in a rural environment has developed unique but unnoticed skills and has produced over centuries many of the excellent products which are currently the proud of Italy and at the same time are highly appreciated all over the world.

Thus, in 1999 the idea of selling these high-quality products directly to the consumer took shape.

Direct selling by producers offers an alternative in which producers and consumers can form a symbiotic relationship depending on their individual desires. This may include a desire for a more environmentally friendly form of farming.

Direct marketing plays a role in rural development by encouraging a climate of entrepreneurship and innovation, attracting agricultural tourists, and promoting alternative forms of agriculture and source of income for small farms, organic farms and other alternative farms.

In a highly urbanized society, direct farm marketing provides a link between urban consumers and rural food producers that can be valuable in developing sustainable communities. Farmers, extension workers, and government officials look to direct marketing as a means of identifying alternative income sources, preserving small farms, strengthening economic and social ties between farms and urban residents, and as an outlet for organic and specialty farm products. Direct sales to consumers can benefit small farms and rural communities in general by channeling a larger share of urban residents' spending on food and recreation back to the communities where food is grown. Direct purchases from farmers provide city residents with a source of inexpensive fresh produce and an opportunity to get in touch with their rural roots.

Increased interest in food safety, the environment, and alternative agriculture has also supported growth of direct sales.

Consumers of these specialty products like to deal face-to-face with growers to ensure that products were grown chemical free or with other desired techniques. Complementing that preference, ecological awareness spurs consumers' interest in agricultural tourism, farm-based recreational activities, and direct-selling arrangements that involve contact with farms and farmers.

### **3. Main tools in support of women in Italian agriculture, the crucial role of information.**

In Italy, the integration of a gender perspective in Regional Rural Development Programmes has become a priority in almost all regions. The previous programming period (2000-2006) gave birth to specific gender approaches that in some cases have been translated into information actions specifically directed to women entrepreneurs, a target group often difficult to reach through the traditional communication channels used by Public Administrations.

It is worth stressing that women comprise 28% of all beneficiaries of rural development programmes and this means that increasingly greater importance is being given to female entrepreneurship in agriculture which is considered a dynamic sector propelling economic growth.

Within the framework of the Italian National Strategy Plan 2007-2013, which, as explained above, is part of the EU Rural Development Policy, it is worth mentioning some interesting opportunities. First of all, attention is being paid to improving access to public services, since many are the rural areas where the difficulty in accessing these services, the lack of alternative job opportunities, and the ageing population are significantly reducing the potential for development and particularly jeopardizing future prospects for women and youth. Therefore, one of the main goals of the Italian rural development policy is to improve the quality of life in rural areas and encourage diversification, which is one of the six EU Strategic Guidelines. The available measures should be used for promoting the development and acquisition of skills and should aim at formulating local development strategies and preserving the amenity value of rural areas for future generations. Information and training are thus fundamental and should be promoted but first of all it is necessary to take into account the specific needs of female, young and old workers.

Moreover, in order to make rural areas more "attractive", the Italian rural development policy intends to promote a sustainable development and create new job opportunities expressly for women and youth, as well as facilitate access to the most state-of-the-art technologies in the field of communication and information. In this regard, diversification into non-agricultural activities and the development of the relationship between agriculture and other rural economic sectors are extremely important.

#### **A. The National Rural Network**

What is the National Rural Network?

Coordination  
Supporting  
Sharing

It is a Programme approved by the Rural Development Committee of the European Commission on 20 June 2007 to support the implementation of rural development policies in Italy for the period 2007-2013.

It enables the coordination and support of the twenty-one regional Rural Development Programmes and aims at strengthening their impact on the territory as well as enhancing inter-territorial and trans-national cooperation projects, encouraging cooperation, exchange of good practices, and sharing of innovation.

Why should the Network be established?

**Participation**  
**Knowledge**  
**Strengthening**

In order to:

- overcome the sectoral isolation of the rural development policy, thus encouraging a more participatory approach (namely «bottom-up») that allows the involvement of actors operating in the rural world as well as of other individuals from different sectors, either national or international;
- promote on a large scale the knowledge of rural development policies being implemented in Italy. That brings out the positive impact RDPs may have on the environment and quality of life as well as their significant role in the improvement of agricultural holdings' competitiveness, in the encouragement of agricultural activities diversification and in the enhancement of culture and rural traditions;
- overdraw the effects and strengthen the performance of measures being co-financed by the European Union through the above-mentioned 21 Rural Development Programmes.

Who are the main beneficiaries?

All organizations and administrations acting directly or indirectly in the field of rural development at international, national, regional and local levels, can become effective members of the Network.

In particular:

Regional and national administrations involved in the implementation of rural development programmes and structural funds;

Local Action Groups and their networks;

Professional organizations, forestry associations, cooperatives, local institutions (local councils, Provinces and mountain communities), environmental associations and NGOs, chambers of commerce and industry.

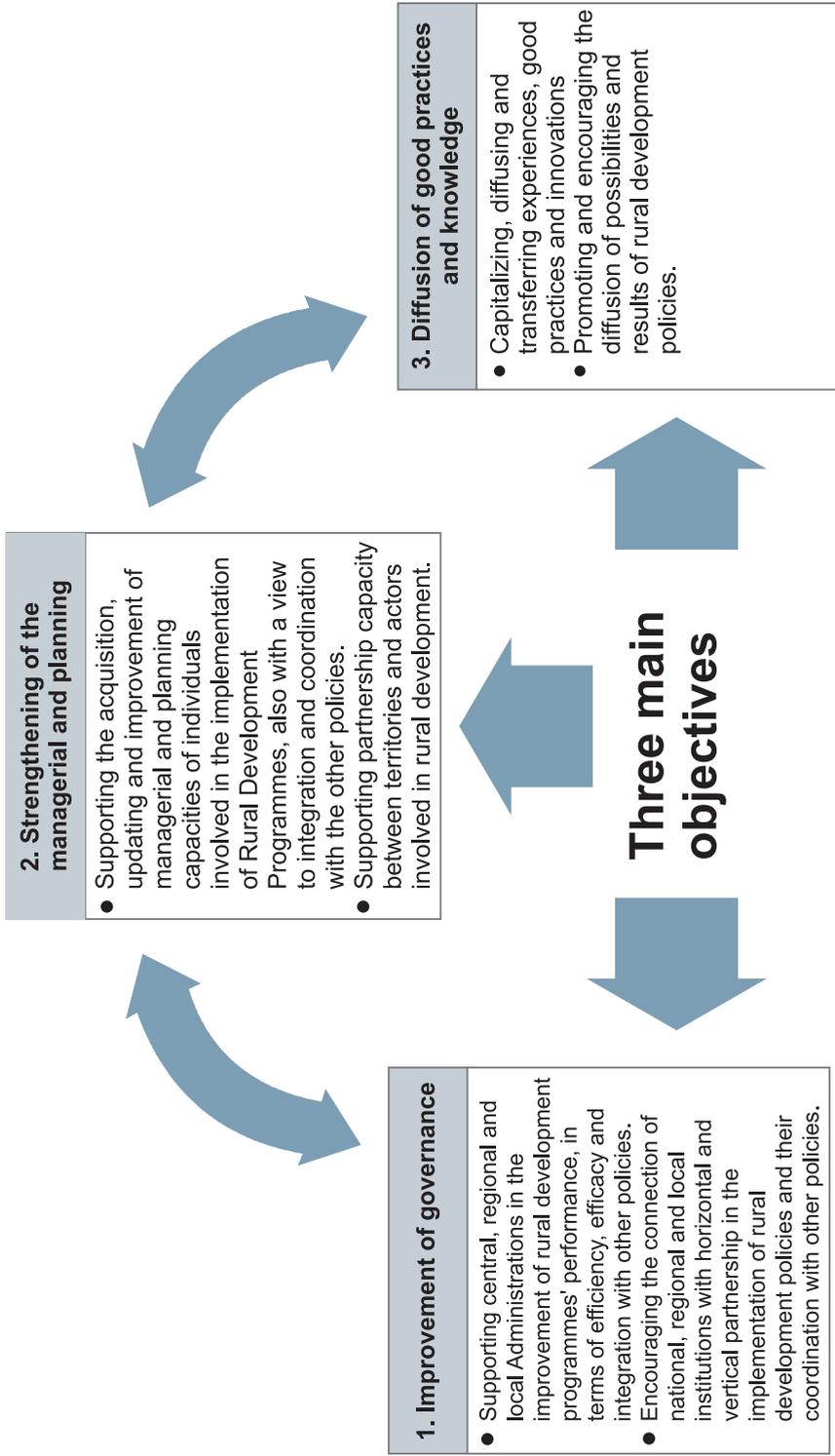


Figure 5.

### ***B. Law No 215/92: “Positive Actions for female entrepreneurship”***

Quality support services for rural women venturing into self-employment, or starting their own businesses or co-operatives, are imperative. Experience shows that, prior to starting a business, women often prefer to participate in women-only courses and groups. But once their business has been established they want access to support services appropriate to the type and size of enterprise they have created.

In the early stages, women may need back-up counselling to help develop their ideas, identify their skills and capacity, and increase their confidence. Later, a range of business support is needed:

- specialised business start-up courses and technical assistance;
- improved access to finance and credit – through credit guarantee funds, special loan funds or positive action in credit applications at start-up and development phases;
- for women farmers, training and technical advice in new farming techniques, diversification and management.

For 15 years rural women entrepreneurs, as well as women workers in other productive sectors, have been benefiting from the subsidies allocated by the Law No 215/92 (“positive actions for female entrepreneurship”), especially for business start-up and innovation projects.

This Law was implemented by the Ministry for Economic Development (previously Ministry for Industry) in order to promote substantial equality and equal opportunities for men and women in economic and entrepreneurial activities. Its main objectives are:

- 1. Decrease of gender inequalities:** the main aim of Law 215/92 is granting capital account funds in order to make fixed investments and acquire real services aimed at the creation and development of women’s enterprises. Therefore, the Law represents a strong commitment by the central government and the regional authorities towards promoting and developing small businesses run predominantly by women. The businesses may be in any sector, and the investments for which the **incentive** is awarded can be made anywhere in the country. The key target is micro enterprises which meet local and market needs.
- 2. Access to the labour market:** the general objective is favouring women’s access to the labour market, with a special reference to self-employment and enterprise.
- 3. Networks and cooperation:** within the Law 215/92, a Committee for Women’s Entrepreneurship was established at all Italian Chambers of Commerce (more than 100 at provincial level) in order to promote and implement measures to favour women’s enterprises on the territory. Such Body, made up of the representatives of several business organizations, including the agricultural ones, is particularly important since its role is to mainstream gender in the economic institutions most concerned with local development.
- 4. Development of theoretical approaches:** promoting women’s involvement in professional sectors and in production segments where they are underrepresented, especially in the technologically-advanced sectors and on levels of responsible positions.

The innovative element of the legislative tool 215/92 is that it is not limited to granting subsidies for creating and/or developing women’s entrepreneurial initiatives, but it is aimed at removing those socio-economic constraints that actually limit or prevent women’s access to the labour market and to the world of jobs and enterprise.

In fact, within the Regional Programmes for women’s entrepreneurship, interventions are implemented that are aimed at:

- Entrepreneurial training in favour of women;
- Information guidance and support to promote a more entrepreneurial culture among women;
- Technical and managerial assistance and advice in favour of women's entrepreneurship;
- Reconciliation of work and family life for women;
- Opening of Centres for Women's employment.

These programmes are entirely funded with public resources (based on a 50/50 split between central government and the regional authorities).

Those who can have access to the subsidies provided for by the Law 215/92 are:

- Individual concerns owned by women;
- Partnerships with a majority of women (no less than 60%);
- Joint-stock companies where the shareholdings are kept by women (at least 2/3) and the management is made up of women for at least 2/3.

The participation to the calls "215/92" is open to all the women's small enterprises depending on the programmes implemented all over the national territory and aimed at their creation and/or development.

The Ministry for Economic Development establishes the guidelines for defining the Regional Programmes for Women's Entrepreneurship on the basis of the information and requests received by the representatives of the Regions and by bodies that are institutionally engaged in the promotion of equal opportunities and in the activation of policies supporting women's entrepreneurship (national network).

The Regions (Council Departments for Equal Opportunities) take care of their realization in collaboration with bodies and associations, public and private, committed in the above mentioned activities on a local scale (regional network).

50% of the resources provided for by the Law 215/92 are allocated in the form of grants, while the remaining 50% in the form of easy-term loans lasting no more than 10 years. However, the Law is currently under revision.

Another important activity carried out in 2004 within the framework of the Law 215/92 that is worth to be mentioned, was the launching of the "1st National Report on women-led enterprises", promoted by the Ministry for Productive Activities, "Unioncamere" and the "Committee for women's entrepreneurship". The Report represents the first statistical analysis concerning women-led businesses and was carried out at national level. Therefore, for the first time, a huge amount of data is available for technicians, analysts, policy makers and others involved in female entrepreneurship issues.

### ***C. Italian agriculture federations: the role of the private sector***

The main agricultural employer organizations in Italy are:

- **Confagricoltura** (Confederazione Generale dell'Agricoltura, General Confederation of Agriculture), which represents various types of farmer – independent farmers, leaseholders, family businesses or partnerships; its members usually operate medium to large-sized enterprises;

- **Coldiretti** (Confederazione Nazionale Coltivatori Diretti, National Confederation of Independent Farmers), which mainly represents medium to small enterprises;
- **CIA** (Confederazione italiana agricoltori, Italian Farmers' Confederation), which aims at protecting and representing the socio-economic and cultural interests of farmers and of those living in rural areas, and at emphasizing the crucial importance of the socio-economic role of agriculture at national and international level.

These Federations have a representative office in Brussels and they are the main interlocutors in the definition and implementation of European policies. Their provincial or more generally "territorial" branches have an extremely significant role because decentralized bargaining has now become of great importance in the sector.

They are also essential support organizations for rural women since within their structure they have female associations, represented by rural women entrepreneurs and officers, that constitute active female units specifically dedicated to rural women at national, regional and provincial levels whose main goal is to achieve effective equality between men and women at all levels and help women's role in agriculture be acknowledged by carrying out close research studies and organizing awareness and information conferences, markets, fairs, seminars, training courses and other public initiatives.

They particularly aim at promoting and developing women's entrepreneurship in agriculture and more generally at improving women's condition in agriculture and rural areas by:

- Promoting women's involvement in decision-making;
- Encouraging an equal participation of men and women in farm activities and management;
- Promoting action to facilitate above all access to credit, training and the creation of advisory services.

and by providing aspirant entrepreneurs with:

- Initial information and guidance;
- Advice;
- Information and training for starting a business;
- Information and training on the fundamental use of communication and information technology;
- Legal consultation, training and technical assistance in the management of their agricultural enterprise;
- Guidance to help them participate in networks of rural women entrepreneurs.

They also promote information and awareness activities involving children in order to help them to develop a positive attitude towards agriculture and at the same time deal with food safety issues.

They develop projects for promoting direct-farm-market selling, an essential tool for increasing the value of local and typical productions.

With reference to Rural Development Plans these federations play a fundamental role in disseminating information since they represent a bridge between workers in the agricultural sector and regional, national and European institutions allocating funds, and often act as spokesperson for both. Without information women would not be aware of the existence of community and

national initiatives in their favour and consequently supply without demand would not exist. Information and training are thus crucial for increasing the demand for specific programmes.

“We think our mission is to make people aware about the crucial importance of women's role in rural entrepreneurship. We want everybody to understand to what extent rural women contribute to the country's development and we want to help these women benefit from national and community rural development policies and programmes.” (Alessandra Oddi Baglioni, representative of Confagricoltura's National Coordination of Female Entrepreneurship).

“Our role as reference points for women entrepreneurship can be summarized in two words: coordination and monitoring of all rural entrepreneurial activities all over Italy.” (Carolina Marino, representative of Coldiretti's Women's Association, Donne Impresa).

“Donne in Campo-CIA has the main role of bringing together women entrepreneurs with the main aim of developing a relational network of enterprises and supporting their activity by providing them with training courses, legal counselling, initiatives promoting multifunctionality with a particular emphasis on environmental and cultural conservation and on establishing a direct contact with consumers.” (Serena Giudici, representative of CIA-Donne in Campo).

#### ***D. The National Observatory for Female Enterprise and Labour in Agriculture (ONILFA)***

The idea of establishing an Observatory for female enterprise and labour in agriculture was developed by the female representatives of the professional agricultural organizations, prompted by the European Day for the Female Agricultural Worker held in Brussels in 1996. On that occasion the Ministry of agriculture, food and forestry policies (MiPAAF) officially accepted the proposal to set up such Observatory.

The Observatory was thus founded in 1997 by the Ministry of agriculture, food and forestry policies (MiPAAF) further to a Ministerial Decree (D. M. dated 13 October 1997). It is made up of 30 members, who represent the main and lesser institutions connected with the national agricultural and rural sectors. In particular, the Observatory, headed by the Minister, comprises the following representatives:

- Ministry of Agricultural and Forestry Policy;
- Ministry of Employment and Social Policy;
- Ministry of Manufacturing Industries;
- Ministry of Economy and Finance;
- Equal Opportunities Department;
- The agricultural organizations CIA, Coldiretti, Confagricoltura and Copagri;
- Regions and Autonomous Provinces;
- INEA and ISTAT.

The Observatory's main aim is to verify actual employment possibilities for women in the rural sector, and formulate the necessary strategies.

In particular, the Observatory aims at:

- Gathering and processing statistical data;
- Analysing the legislation regarding female employment and equal opportunities;
- Examining the actions undertaken by the European Union and Central and regional governments that are aimed at promoting various initiatives in the field of female entrepreneurship;
- Creating links with information sources and with the research field;
- Promoting pilot schemes, together with Regions and Autonomous Provinces, aimed at supporting women in rural enterprise.

The Observatory 's main activities involve:

- The organization of conferences, seminars and information days, with the aim of creating opportunities to talk about important issues, spread knowledge and compare experience on matters regarding women's condition in rural areas;
- The undertaking of information-gathering surveys on matters concerning the role and function of women in the development of rural areas, in order to provide the public administration with useful indications needed for the planning of specific interventions;
- The processing and publication of information about issues the Observatory deals with;
- The designing and setting up of a website as a means of dissemination of information.

It is worth mentioning that every year the Observatory organizes the Italian celebration of the World Rural Women's Day as a way of emphasizing women's vital contribution to food security and safety and to the development of rural areas that goes largely unnoticed. Within such event ONILFA has been organizing since 2001 another event called "De@Terra" Award with the aim of giving a recognition to some women entrepreneurs for their contribution to the development of Italian agriculture and as a way to encourage female entrepreneurship in the rural sector.

## **VI – Conclusions and recommendations**

The role of women in agriculture throughout the world is instrumental. Be it in Africa, Europe, Asia or America, the role women play in contributing to the world's food supply is immeasurable, therefore, women's equal participation in developing policy and implementation of policy is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but it is a necessary condition for women's interest to be taken into account.

Agriculture means one thing for a woman in a country and something entirely different for a woman in another country. Some women in the world are part of large business ventures, while others are trying to maintain a consistent source of food for their families. But they all share the commonality of being farm women and devoting their lives to their families and food security.

Therefore, even though women farmers' conditions differ greatly from country to country and even within the same country, common objectives can be found. We can learn much from one another at the global level, and this comes by educating and training one another.

The analysis conducted in this paper focuses on the main rural development policies and programmes in support of rural women at European, national and regional level. The research clearly demonstrates the importance of women in agriculture, their multiform contribution to

European agriculture, and the need to strengthen their role in rural areas by initiatives in the field of agricultural development.

Although specific actions in favour of rural women have been undertaken at both national and European levels, much remains to be done to eliminate the gap between men and women, which is still too great. It is sufficient to recall here that almost half of the situations of inactivity on the part of women are due to family and domestic commitments.

First of all, specific socio-economic actions for rural women should be necessarily included in all Rural Development Programmes and Policies at national and regional level. Secondly, in order to overcome the constraints and barriers that still prevent the full realization of rural women's potential and in order to enable women to fully contribute to the development of their communities, rural areas should be able to meet certain essential conditions:

- The opportunity to acquire work experience and professional qualifications;
- Local education and training services;
- Services for enterprise supporting projects and initiatives presented by rural women;
- Public transport services compatible with working hours;
- Local childcare facilities, such as rural kindergartens, and social services for the elderly to help women reconcile work and family life;
- Professional and public support organizations.

In particular, policies should be oriented towards:

- Facilitating women's participation and access to the labour market also stimulating the development of alternative activities for rural women (i.e. small scale enterprises, organic agriculture; agritourism);
- Facilitating women's access to training, technology, and information to enhance their vocational skills;
- Planning interventions for the equal distribution of family responsibilities;
- Strengthening rural women's participation in decision-making processes at all levels.

Information is a basic tool that can go two ways: to and from. Often the tendency has been to try to inform women, the up-down approach. It is however obvious that information on women's needs and opinions is of utmost importance when it comes to formulating policies since they are frequently formulated on the basis of the misconception that everyone's needs and interests are similar. Collecting gender-disaggregated data is an indispensable step towards making women visible as human beings, social actors, and farmers as well.

Networking is a key word. By facilitating networking among women, and combining this with information and training women will gain the knowledge they need.

Consequently:

- Agriculture should be **analyzed** as a part of a larger context, economically, socially and politically, so that rural women's needs are not narrowly identified in relation to a special, other technically defined "sector". In many societies, living in a rural area is not a synonym for gaining your living by farming - consequently a wider thinking is important.

- «Information/participation» in relation to rural women should not be seen primarily as a question of enhancing efficiency or effectiveness in order to raise production or the quality of planning but be **analyzed** foremost from the perspective of equity, power relations, political and Human Rights. The point of departure should be constituted by women's own realities, needs and aspirations, in relation to their different inter-linked productive and reproductive roles.

In particular, the priorities should be:

- Continuing to demonstrate the importance of information and dissemination of information about rural women's capabilities and their contribution to agriculture in order to promote more gender responsive policy-making and planning;
- Improving the knowledge-base on local initiatives for development in rural areas, especially those focusing on farm and rural women;
- Establishing information networks and strengthening communication channels among rural women and between rural women and government institutions through the use of professional and civil society organizations and the media;
- Setting up a monitoring system such as the Observatory for Rural Women Entrepreneurs;
- Continuing to provide assistance to the promotion of the World Rural Women's Day and developing other sensitization, mobilization and advocacy activities in favour of rural women.

The strengthening of the above mentioned services would provide an increasingly higher number of women with entrepreneurial, employment and training opportunities, would improve women's skills and professional qualifications, and would be a real investment in human resources. By supporting rural women, innovative solutions for local development and new services would emerge, and this would improve the quality of rural life contributing at the same time to the conservation of rural communities.

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