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MAP Position Note

# EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES



SHERPA has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No. 862448. The content of the document does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed therein lies entirely with the author(s).

# EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES

## MAP POSITION NOTE

### MAP MONTAGNA TOSCANA - MOVING

Version 12.04.2023

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**Citation:** *Tomasi, S. (2023). Empowering Rural Areas in Multi-Level Governance Processes, MAP Position Note (Italy, Montagna Toscana – Moving). DOI 10.5281/zenodo.8238432*

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## 1. Current situation based on background research and evidence

According to FAO data from 2013 (retrieved from Castellotti & Doria, 2016), together with China, Italy is the major exporter of chestnuts in the world. Nevertheless, as the Italian varieties derive from the *Castanea sativa*, their organoleptic, technological and aesthetic characteristics make them of higher quality than the Chinese varieties, deriving from the *Castanea mollissima*. The main European competitor for Italy in this field is Portugal, which gained the lead in the exportation of chestnuts (Castellotti & Doria, 2016).

In terms of farmers' characteristics, in Italy about 60% of chestnut farmers are 55 or more. 34% are over 65. 30% is represented by the age range of 40-54. Young farmers between 24-39 years old almost represent 10%, while very young farmers (16-24) are about 0,8%. About 35% of chestnut farms are run by women. In terms of education level, only 7,5% graduated, while 25% have a high school diploma. The majority (67%) did not attend or finish high school. The farms are mainly family-led. Being an ageing sector, the level of farms' diversification and multifunctionality is quite low (only 11% run connected activities). The depopulation of inner areas and the soil and climate characteristics mainly made the chestnut production activity concentrated in high hills and mountains. On average, the dedicated surface per each chestnut grove is about 2 ha (Mariotti *et al.*, 2019).

As described in a draft version of the Plan for the chestnut production sector 2021/2024 by the Italian Ministry of the Agricultural, Food and Forestry policies (MIPAAF, 2021), from a policy perspective, at European level, the chestnut value chain can count on the thematic sub-programmes from the Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) - e.g.: dedicated to young, small farms, mountain areas and short supply chains - in order to develop and restore particular agricultural activities in specific areas. Moreover, the RDPs, in accordance with the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), foster the creation of farmers' networks and associations, the collaboration within the supply chains, cooperative opportunities at international level, through a series of initiatives and measures, such as the European Partnerships for Innovation. A major role is also played by the LEADER approach and the related activity of the Local Action Groups. The RDPs (especially from the 2014-2020 programming period) through the Rural Development Plan, applied at the regional level, have progressively considered forestry in their policies, providing dedicated funding to support forest ecosystems preservation and valorisation.

As for Tuscany, the 2010 census registered that, at that time, there were 5336 chestnut farms in the region, for a total of 10.399 ha cultivated. Nevertheless, in 2009 ARSIA declared that more than half of the total surface occupied by chestnut groves in Tuscany (32.300 ha), was abandoned. From 2000 to 2010 Tuscany lost 38% of chestnut farms and 36% of the dedicated surface (Castellotti & Doria, 2016). According to 2016 data, Tuscany in that year could count on 2.270 chestnut fruit farms, on a total of dedicated 5.675 ha. From 2010 to 2016 Tuscany lost 55,4 % of chestnut groves' surface and 57,5% of farms in that sector (Mariotti *et al.*, 2019).

The current regional production is mainly organic, even though in the majority of cases the producers do not recognise themselves under the official European labelling scheme (or others). Tuscany counts on several PDO and PGI certifications related to chestnut and chestnut flour.

As for the PDO: Chestnut flour from Lunigiana; Neccio (chestnut) flour from Garfagnana; Marrone (type of chestnut) from Caprese Michelangelo. As for the PGI: Chestnut from Mount Amiata; Marrone from Mugello (Tuscany Region, 2022).

From a governance perspective, while Garfagnana can count on the aggregative role of a dedicated association of chestnut producers (Associazione Castanicoltori della Garfagnana) that works as a consortium, which also promoted the recognition process towards the PDO certification, and producers from Lunigiana are involved in the Rural District of Lunigiana, Alta Versilia, where the Montagna Toscana- MOVING MAP located is less structured, in this sense. Indeed, producers mainly rely on the strength of informal social ties and on the aggregative role of a small association, the “Bioeroi”.

## 2. Position of the Multi-Actor Platform

The MAP Montagna Toscana corresponds to the [MAP Northern Apennines of the MOVING project](#), which mainly involves agricultural companies, producers and producers’ associations, in addition to policy-makers, researchers, non-agricultural businesses, NGOs, and representatives from the civil society. During the different MAP cycles, mainly actors from Alta Versilia (municipalities of Stazzema and Seravezza in Lucca Province) have been involved. More recently, actors related to the chestnut flour value chain from the Garfagnana area have been included in some of the activities, in order to provide opportunities to share approaches and needs.

In 2021, the MAP started its stakeholder engagement process through a face-to-face workshop for the evaluation of the vulnerability of the area and of the value chain. The area has a high level of vulnerability caused by land abandonment and climate change. Being a mountainous region, inhabitants face several difficulties such as a lack of essential services and infrastructure. Due to its closeness to the marine area (Versilia) and to the not-too-long distance from the main service centres (up to 20 minutes by car), according to the definition of inner areas from the National Strategy for Inner Areas by Barca *et al.* (2014), Alta Versilia, in its totality, is not considered an inner area. Indeed, for the new programming period 2021-2027, Tuscany Region recently updated the map of the regional inner areas: the data refer to 2020, when only the municipality of Stazzema has been included in the list (Category D – Intermediate), according to the most recent data from Tuscany Region (2022a). The inclusion/exclusion from the regional map of inner areas influences the distribution of dedicated public incentives and funding to support the increase of essential services provision and new opportunities for small entrepreneurs and inhabitants in the area.

In 2022, several in-depth interviews have been carried out with chestnut flour producers, “metato”(building for the drying stage) and mills owners, local policy makers and representatives of local associations to collect data about the sustainability of the value chain, according to the conceptual framework elaborated by the MOVING partners (Moretti *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, activities, such as seminars and workshops, to gain an overview on complementary value chains (e.g.: chestnut honey, mountain tourism, agroforestry ecosystem services) have been carried out.

From these activities, it emerged that the area faces several threats: climate change (especially drought); demographic changes (depopulation and ageing) with a consequent lack of social interactions and abandonment of chestnut groves, *metati* and mills. Due to these conditions, locals emigrate or move to other neighbouring areas to find a job in other fields (e.g.: seasonal tourism jobs, marble caves) and there is the risk of losing the traditional practices related to the chestnut flour production and their social relevance for the community.

During the last MAP cycle (2023) a focus on future scenarios has been done, first, by involving high schools to understand how young generations can create value and new opportunities for the

mountain areas and (viceversa) how the mountain area can produce opportunities for the young to live, work and spend quality time in mountain areas. Secondly, a workshop in two steps, involving the MAP actors, has been organised to discuss and validate a potential future scenario for the mountain areas. During all these opportunities for actors to collectively reflect, several elements of strengths and needs emerged. These are listed below.

## 2.1. Identified strengths and needs

Key question to address: What are the key strengths and needs identified by the MAP in relation to governance within the MAP area?

Strengths:

- The relevance of social ties at the local level: the values of sharing, friendship, pursuing community goals, like caring together for the common good, were mentioned among the values identified by the operators involved in the chestnut value chain in Alta Versilia.
- The collaborative environment, trust, and lack of competitive mentality, that enhance horizontal coordination.
- Presence of highly dedicated civil society organisations, with a strong aggregating role and working as a consortium but with a more informal role and structure.
- Human capital, local knowledge and expertise at the basis of the chestnut flour value chain.
- Co-learning as a common practice among the actors of the value chain.
- The provision of ecosystem services to the community through the management of the chestnut groves: CO<sub>2</sub> sequestration, soil preservation, water flow, mushroom, and comestible fruits provision, maintenance and preservation of cultural heritage and socio-cultural traditional practices, etc.
- Multifunctionality of agricultural businesses (both a strength and a need).

Needs:

- New job opportunities in the area, based on local and sustainable value chains. Their promotion would be especially relevant when the value chains are/can be integrated with other activities and sectors in the area, to strengthen the local economy and help maintain ecosystem services.
- Need for revising and improving the efficiency of institutional mechanisms for making land available, e.g. Tuscany Land Bank, Regulation about the civic usage of lands (L.R. 27/2014 and Reg. n. 52/R/2015) to incentivise land management. This would allow the expansion of the surface dedicated to chestnut trees, increase the production and strengthen the potential of the chestnut flour short supply chain and finally absorb the demand. Moreover, it would create new agroforestry ecosystem services.
- Finding new ways to manage the damages created by wild animals to the groves.
- Need to increase the population and improve the essential services for locals (e.g.: schools, healthcare services, grocery stores, etc.).
- Strengthening trust relationships and joint initiatives among public entities and local actors from different neighbouring municipalities.
- Improve the integration among different governance levels: local, regional, national, european.

- Provision of education and training services, primarily aimed at strengthening available human capital and local knowledge.
- Better vertical coordination, starting from administrative support: bureaucracy, financial barriers and lack of skills in project planning and management hinder especially the initiatives of the smaller operators' (e.g. small businesses, farms, and civil society organisations) limiting their potential contribution to the development of their area.
- Need to find new ways (e.g.: by involving schools) to incentivise young generations (e.g.: high school students) to "get closer" to the mountain and to connect with chestnut flour value chain actors in order to learn from them and allow the transmission of knowledge and know-how and finally carry on the tradition.

## 2.2. Existing interventions and actions

Key question to address: What are examples of existing or emerging governance good practice(s) identified by the MAP that have helped address regional and local needs? What are existing or emerging bad practice examples that the MAP would like to share?

Table 1 – Examples of actions taken by local actors

### **Banca della Terra (Land Bank) - Regione Toscana** [www.regione.toscana.it/-/la-banca-della-terra](http://www.regione.toscana.it/-/la-banca-della-terra)

The Land Bank of Tuscany Region is an updated and complete inventory of public and private lands that are made available through rentals or other forms of contracts to promote the use of abandoned lands to make them productive by fostering young entrepreneurship, the safeguard of biodiversity, landscape and forestry heritage and by preventing natural catastrophes. They are accessible to people that want to start an agricultural activity through an official web portal where public calls are published.

According to the MAP stakeholders, this is a valuable initiative that should be revised in order to be more effective, as it requires a deep knowledge of the specificities of each rural area involved and, as a consequence, a better integration between the local and the regional level. Moreover, it would need the presence of specialised technicians within the municipalities, at a local level, to manage the more practical issues.

### **The Mountain Guardians ("I Custodi della Montagna") and the Community Pacts (L.R. 4/2022)** <https://www.regione.toscana.it/-/custodi-della-montagna-e-patti-di-comunit%C3%A0-procedura-per-ottenere-i-contributi>

This is a form of economic incentive dedicated to SMEs (and SMEs to be) willing to start a business or to re-organise a pre-existing economic activity in a disadvantaged mountain area. The initiative aims at contrasting depopulation and revitalising mountain areas both from a social and an economic perspective. By signing a "Community Pact" with the municipality in which the business is legally and operatively located, the latter would receive an added 20% of the incentive to provide territorial care and social services to benefit the wider community. This initiative was funded in 2022.

The MAP actors stressed the importance of such an initiative and hope for further incentives. Some of them pointed out the necessity to review some of the criteria of inclusion/exclusion to access the funding to allow more firms to apply.

## Recommendations from the MAP

*SHERPA has the goal of developing recommendations for future research agendas but also for future rural policies. Therefore, we ask the MAP members to answer the following two questions:*

### 2.2.1. Recommendations for future rural policies

Key question to address: What kind of policy support could help to improve governance and stakeholder engagement at the local, regional, and/or national level (e.g. policies, platforms, forums)? How can the EU support these interventions?

- Revising and strengthening existing or past positive initiatives and giving them continuity, by involving the local actors in the decision-making process, e.g.: "Banca della Terra", "Custodi della Montagna"; "Usi civici" or new ones;
- Promoting a cooperative approach: incentivising the building of community cooperatives, energy communities, solidarity purchasing groups, tourism consortia, etc.) by providing quality products and services, focusing on niches, valuing biodiversity, local history and traditions. This would create new services for locals and new work opportunities;
- Supporting local actors in accessing funding opportunities through bureaucracy simplification and by providing them with professional support (e.g.: human capital expert in project planning and management);
- Enhancing the aggregative role of local associations: this could have a role in making youngsters get closer (also figuratively) to the mountain areas and in preserving the sense of community and trust through social ties.

### 2.3.2 Recommendations for future research agendas

Key questions to address: What are the knowledge gaps on governance and stakeholder engagement, and what future research projects are needed to address these gaps? What could be specific research questions that should be answered?

- The university could support the Region and local administrations in mapping the abandoned chestnut groves (surface, varieties, ect.) to facilitate the processes of re-use of abandoned lands;
- The university could have a role in deepening the knowledge about the organoleptic characteristics of the different varieties produced in the area. These data could support producers to assess the credibility of their flour in terms of quality;
- The university could play a role as a "synergies' facilitator" and run action-research by implementing and giving continuity to participatory approaches and then investigating the social impact of such actions: indeed, some MAP stakeholders admitted that participating in the project activities made some useful synergies emerge: personal interactions and new relationships created direct access to information (e.g.: funding opportunities and initiatives) and promoted aggregation.



### 3. Conclusions

The Map Montagna Toscana has been particularly active. Several activities to bring the local actors together and make them discuss and reflect collectively have been carried out and made emerge some useful policy recommendations: on the one hand, at the regional level there are several ongoing or past initiatives that could be innovated and improved to make them more effective (e.g.: Banca della Terra, Custodi della Montagna, etc.). On the other hand, taking a cooperative approach has been recognised by some stakeholders as the most effective way to provide new services for locals and to create diversification in production activities. Anyway, local actors would need to take an active part in the decision-making process and would need further support to get access to the opportunities provided at the regional and local level, both in terms of reduction of bureaucracy and in terms of technical help. In this context, the role of the university could be the one of "connector" by creating opportunities for the creation of new relationships and continuity in the process of stakeholder engagement. A pivotal role is also played by local associations, also in terms of social aggregation.

## Acknowledgments

*The authors and contributors acknowledge the MAP actors, the involved researchers of the MOVING project Michele Moretti, Francesco Felici, Manola Colabianchi e Tarek Allali for their availability and for the information provided.*

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