

## Consuming policy in a coherent way: some differences in the Italian agrifood districts

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**Abstract:** *The paper analyses the relevance of territorial dimension in the “access” to rural development policy. More precisely, the scope is to determine whether or not the presence of district-contexts produces territorial differences in the consumption of economic policies among the farms. Our hypothesis is that the geographical location in a “real” district should fosters a more intense consume of policy. The application to rural and agrifood districts partially confirms our hypothesis, stimulating some normative action both to rigorously recognize district contexts and to facilitate the access and the consumption of rural development policies.*

**Keywords:** *rural development policies, rural and agrifood districts*

### Introduction

The role of localised food systems (LFS) is still relevant in the agrofood and rural economies, where territoriality is a competitive strategy, even in a globalized world. As underlined in the wide literature on this subject, the economies of a LFS are due either to the action of “atmospheric”, marshallian-like, phenomena (Becattini, 2004), or to the flexible organisation of production (Pyke and Sengenberger, 1992), or to the presence of relational goods in local economies (Storper, 1997). Therefore, the territory is not considered as a physical container of development initiatives, but as a relational-diversified space (Capello, 2004), where economic and social networks give raise to both heterogeneous organisational models and development trajectories. Basic steps of this paradigm shift are both the strong firm’s link to territory, which differentiates rooted from “camped” firms (Becattini, 1999), and the change from a firm-based to a territory-based competition perspective. This is supported by the shift from a sectoral, generally top-down policy to a territorial policy. Recent proposals of political economy have taken into account the territorial perspective as evident within the neo-institutional approach to local development (Amin, 2004). Recent rural development policies of the European Union are coherent with this standpoint, by proposing ascending and bottom-up policies. They offer a set of resources for local development that, if well exploited, can generate great opportunities for development (Bartoli, De Rosa, 2009). Our hypothesis is that territories with the same “physical” characteristics show different capabilities to exploit the opportunities: in other words, they demonstrate different degrees of consumption of policies. These differences will be analysed in Italy with reference to a particular category of LFS, the agrifood and rural districts, recently instituted by the law of modernisation of the Italian agriculture (228/01).

After a brief excursus about recent regionalisation of rural development policies and the district concept, the work goes on with a methodological note concerning the estimation of the consumption of policy. An empirical test applied to rural and agrifood Italian districts will be proposed; some final considerations will end the paper.

### Theoretical background

In the last two decades rural development policy has showed a theoretical turn, following new approaches to territorial development, which seems coherent with a bottom-up perspective on local development, defined “neo-institutionalist” by Amin (2004). In the framework of the rural policy we have observed a real regionalisation effect of the European policies for rural development (Trouvé,

2004; Mantino, 2009), with the emergence of a third level of governance (regional, respecting the European and national ones). Besides, the first pillar of the common agricultural policy (CAP), has been largely reviewed, with the introduction of conditionality and decoupling principles and a set of incentives to increase farm's competitiveness and multifunctionality. In this context territorial dimension is getting a growing importance in fostering agriculture and rural development. However, the emerging territorial models are characterised by the large complexity, due to the interplay problems among local actors (Young, 2002). A virtuous circuit is possible through a strong institutional thickness, which fosters a cooperation and a trust climate between the actors and the local institutions. This perspective has important outcomes in theoretical and empirical terms: from theoretical point of view, a renewal of the institutional perspectives of local development is necessary (Amin, 2004): untraded interdependencies (Storper, 1995), local conventions and a participatory model become essential to really exploit the new opportunities offered by the rural development policy. In this context the meso-analytical perspective offered by the local productive systems gives useful tools for the empirical analysis: the Syal vein of research have emphasised the strict link among farms and territory, which is demand-pull and stimulate high quality products and the constitution of territorial networks able to innovate and to reach high level of competitiveness (Requier-Desjardin, 2007). The role of farm is expressed either in niche product of high and certificated quality, or within a territorial basket of goods and services, where agriculture plays an important role as multifunctional activity (Muchnik *et al.*, 2008). This perspective has been traduced in normative initiatives: in Italy, the importance of LFS has been acknowledged by the law 228/01, that foresees the agri-food and the rural districts recognised at regional level (Sassi, 2009). The renewal of the neo-marshallian perspective on local agri-food and rural development has been deeply acknowledged in literature (Iacoponi, 1990): many studies have recognised the importance of this organisational model, based on the production of quality products, with high levels of efficiency due to the reduction in transaction costs (Belletti, Marescotti, Scaramuzzi, 2002), to the capabilities to generate innovation thanks to specialised figures like versatile integrators (Becattini, 2004) and to a set of assets, tangible and intangible, able to produce a district effect (Brasili, Ricci Maccarini, 2001).

According to the law 228/01, quality agrifood districts are local productive systems characterised by a relevant economic presence and either by the productive interaction of local farms and processing industries and by the presence of a certificated production and by typical and traditional products. Rural districts are characterised by historical identity, territorial integration among different sectors and production of specific goods and services. Farms' role in two districts is different: in agrifood districts the sectoral perspective foster a process of integration and interdependence with the processing food industry, and a process of qualification of products, through association and cooperation phenomena. In rural districts the farm should empower its multifunctional role, through diversification processes and a growing integration with the other component of the territory.

Competitive advantages, matured within district contexts, produce a dynamic efficiency too, due to the innovative capabilities and to a strategic vision of local actors. The dramatic change in the offer of policies for agriculture and for rural development gives new opportunities for farms' competitiveness and multifunctionality: policy measures to increase added value of products and for their valorisation, incentives for cooperation and to increase the capabilities to qualify the product in a collective way are fundamental aspects of the new paradigm of the policy offer. Besides, incentives for farm diversification and to stimulate the role of multifunctional agriculture are new tools for fostering a more integrated approach to farm activity in rural areas and, consequently, in rural districts. The integration of agriculture with other territorial activity becomes a strategic policy objective that, if realised, should bring to the offer of a territorial pannier of goods and services (Pecqueur, 2001). A district area should have the strategic intangible resources to fully exploit these opportunities.

However, a paradox has to be underlined for both rural and agrifood districts: in a number of cases, the recognition of a district is more a political than a really endogenous process: in our opinion the agrifood/rural district could be generally the effect of a pressure group aiming at obtaining the

acknowledgement in rural areas which have no district characteristics. Atmospheric and marshallian-like elements, essential for the working of a district, are absent in not pure forms of local productive systems. Besides, methodology for recognition is often different in various regions and within the same region. This could generate different territorial performances and diverse capabilities to plan territorial paths of development.

The access to rural development policies is a good field of proof to demonstrate the ability of local systems to coherently plan their own development on the basis of the financial supports offered by rural development policies (Bartoli *et al.*, 2007). Literature on localised productive system has not always devoted the necessary attention to this field of research; this work fits in this context and intends to propose a new perspective of analysis on local systems, aimed at describing the behaviour of farms which operate within a district; more specifically, the research proposes to describe the strategic behaviour of farms in terms of demand of policy to develop farm activity. The policy kit at disposal of farm is very large and diversified, aiming at fostering processes of boundary shift (Banks, Long and van der Ploeg, 2002)<sup>1</sup>.

A sort of coherency in the consumption of policies is then defined as the higher capability to exploit policy offer on behalf of district areas. The following question has to be addressed in this context: are there differences among in and off-district farms in the access to policies for agriculture and rural development?

To answer this question, the analysis of the relevance of district effect is essential. To this end an empirical investigation will be proposed, based on a sample of farms which are localised within rural and agrifood Italian districts.

## Methodological note

### The areas under study

The investigated rural areas are represented in the box 1 and 2. Rural districts have been extracted in central Italy (box 1).

#### Box 1. Rural districts in central Italy.

Region Lazio: Montagna Reatina (recognised)  
 Region Tuscany: Maremma (recognised)  
 Regions Umbria and Marche: Appennino centrale umbro marchigiano (in progress)  
 Region Marche Colli Esini: (not recognised)

As evident from the box, we can distinguish among different rural districts: some of them have obtained an official acknowledgment; some others are in progress, finally we have considered the rural district “Colli Esini” which has been self-constituted and has not been recognised by the region.

The considered agrifood districts are localised in northern, central and southern Italy, respectively in the regions of Piedmont, Lazio, Basilicata and Calabria (box 2).

#### Box 2. Agrifood districts: fruit and vegetable sector.

Region Piedmont: Agrifood district in the province of Alessandria  
 Region Lazio: Agrifood district in the province of Latina  
 Region Basilicata: Agrifood district of Metapontino  
 Region Calabria: Agrifood district of Sibari

As underlined in recent literature (Falconer, 2000), the consumption of policies generates some costs, classifiable as transaction costs of the policy consumption, due to informational asymmetries, bureaucracy costs and opportunity costs. Here the hypothesis is that external economies produced within a district context should really reduce these costs, so facilitating the access to the policy

<sup>1</sup> Boundary shift is characterised by a farm’s functional repositioning through processes called *deepening* (qualification of food and agricultural products), *broadening* (diversification of farm activities) and *regrounding* with a growing integration of farm activity with the territorial context

market. As a consequence, the intensity of consumption within a district context should be remarkably higher.

**The empirical analysis**

The research has taken into account the payments and the investments funded in the period 2001-2006, within the district area and outside of it. The considered payments and investments are related to European, National and Regional source of funding:

PAYMENTS: income integration and environmental contributions.

INVESTMENTS: diversification and valorisation, structural investments, investments for generational exchange, human capital.

The informations have been extracted from database RICA-REA of the National Institute of Agricultural Economics. In the case of rural district, the off-district areas have been selected among the municipalities classified as rural marginal areas and intermediate rural areas by the recent National Strategic Plans. As concerns, agrifood district, the differences have been obtained by comparing in and off-districts farms with fruit and vegetable crops.

Table 1 shows the extracted sample, the number of farms in and off-district areas, and the average surface of the farm extracted.

**Table1.** The sample extracted

	Rural districts							
	COLLI ESINI		MAREMMA		MONTAGNA REATINA		APP.CENTRALE UMBRO MARCHIGIANO	
	farms	surface	farms	surface	farms	surface	farms	surface
district	504	24,1	682	46,7	199	29,4	292	50,9
no district	3604	25,7	2257	69,7	2.170	20,1	6078	31,7
	Agrifood districts							
	PIEDMONT		LAZIO		BASILICATA		CALABRIA	
	farms	surface	farms	surface	farms	surface	farms	surface
district	60	17,6	42	6,8	497	12,8	86	43,5
no district	449	9,3	325	10,1	18	27,0	124	12,3

A dissimilarity index has been calculated, to demonstrate eventual differences among the amounts of funds received by farms localised inside and outside the districts. The index is calculated as follows (Duncan and Duncan, 1995):

$$D_{d, nd} = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{k=1}^n |F_{k, d} - F_{k, nd}|$$

Where:

F = the share of the funds relative to the measure k;

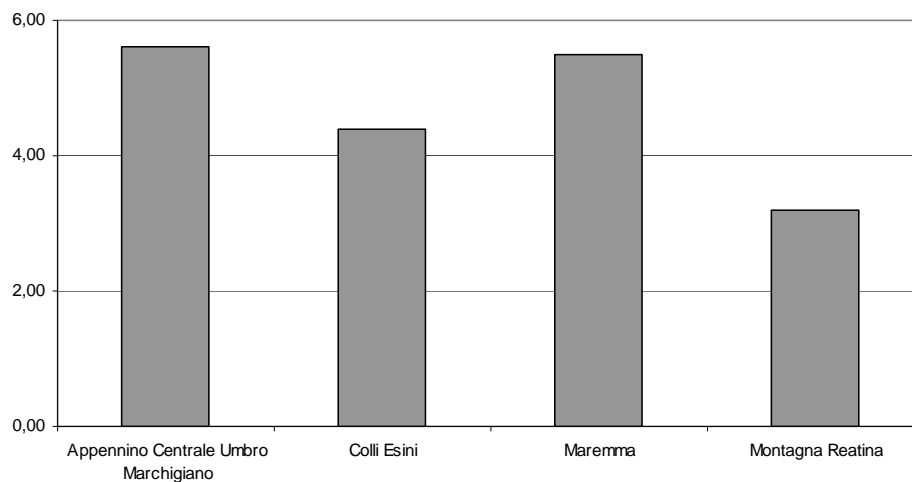
d and nd are respectively district and no district areas. The index fluctuates between 0 (same composition of the funds received) and 1 (maximum dissimilarity).

**Results**

*The rural districts*

The result of empirical tests are significant to the end of our paper: figure 1 shows the differences in the number of grants obtained by farms localised in the different rural districts.

The rural district of Maremma in Tuscany and the rural district of Appennino Centrale demonstrate the highest propensity to consume policy, with respect to other districts. The minimum result is registered in the rural district of Montagna Reatina, which evidences the lowest performance.



**Figure 1.** Number of grants obtained in rural districts.

Source: elaborations from database RICA-REA

The second important result is relative to the policy consumed and aimed at fostering processes of boundary shift, whose considered proxy are the incentives for diversification and valorisation: table 2 reports the funds per hectare obtained for broadening (diversification) and deepening (valorisation) actions, confirming previous performances.

**Table 2.** Funds obtained for diversification and valorisation

RURAL DISTRICTS	F/ ha	F/farm
Appennino Centrale Umbro Marchigiano	1,1	54,0
Colli Esini	4,7	113,7
Maremma	5,1	236,1
Montagna Reatina	17,4	511,0

Source: elaborations from database RICA-REA

The farms belonging to the rural district Montagna Reatina, even if with lowest numbers of grants received, show the highest performance (per hectare and per farms) in terms of amount received to stimulate processes of boundary shift. Maremma exhibits good results, while the lowest performance is registered in the rural district of Appennino Centrale.

Extending the analysis to the comparison between in and off-district areas, we can find other interesting results in terms of “district effect”. More specifically, from the outcomes we can deny the indifference hypothesis of farms’ localisation inside or outside the districts. In fact, with the only exception of rural district Colli Esini (the self-constitute, but not institutionalised district), the grants perceived by district farms remains regularly higher with respect to the farms localised outside the district (tab.3).

**Table 3.** Grants per farm inside and outside the rural districts.

	Grants/farm
UMBRIA AND MARCHE	
Appennino Centrale Umbro Marchigiano	5,6
No district	4,6
MARCHE	
Colli Esini	4,4
No district	4,5
TUSCANY	
Maremma	5,5
No district	4,3
LAZIO	
Montagna Reatina	3,2
No district	2,8

Source: elaborations from database RICA-REA

Further informations arise from the total expenditure per farm and per hectare. Table 4 illustrates the average amount (per farm and per hectare) for payments and investments. In the recognised rural districts, the local effect is relevant in Montagna Reatina both for payments and investments; in Maremma it is relevant just for investments. These two districts are very attractive for young farmers too.

In the self-recognised district of Colli Esini a lower level of both payments and investments is evident. In rural district of Appennino Centrale, the relevance of district effect is limited to payments, particularly for environmental payments. Focusing on the measure for stimulate the boundary shift, they are evident in rural district of Montagna Reatina, while are less important in the other districts.

**Table 4.** Average funds received by farms for some type of policies

	investments	gener. exchange	diversification and valorisation	income integration	environm. payments	average payments	average investments
Rural district of Colli Esini							
per farm							
District	226,8	0,0	113,7	8689,9	1613,4	10303,3	340,6
no district	251,3	30,5	143,9	7798,0	1175,7	8973,8	425,7
per hectare							
District	9,4	0,0	4,7	360,9	67,0	427,9	14,1
no district	9,8	1,2	5,6	303,9	45,8	349,8	16,6
Rural district of Maremma							
per farm							
District	2437,5	105,8	236,1	13646,9	2828,9	16475,8	2782,8
no district	2133,0	55,1	370,4	19432,6	4316,7	23749,3	2566,2
per hectare							
District	52,2	2,3	5,1	292,3	60,6	352,8	59,6
no district	30,6	0,8	5,3	278,9	62,0	340,8	36,8
Rural district of Montagna Reatina							
per farm							
District	1954,4	3600,1	511,0	5508,7	2266,1	7774,8	6065,5
no district	386,8	600,8	149,3	6454,8	644,7	7099,5	1137,0
per hectare							
District	66,5	122,6	17,4	187,5	77,2	264,7	206,5
no district	19,2	29,9	7,4	321,0	32,1	353,0	56,5
Appennino Centrale Umbro Marchigiano							
per farm							
District	239,7	0,0	54,0	10194,0	3798,7	13992,7	293,7
no district	226,7	41,8	127,8	14115,1	2110,1	16225,2	396,2
per hectare							
District	4,7	0,0	1,1	200,3	74,6	274,9	5,8
no district	7,1	1,3	4,0	444,9	66,5	511,4	12,5

Source: elaborations from database RICA-REA

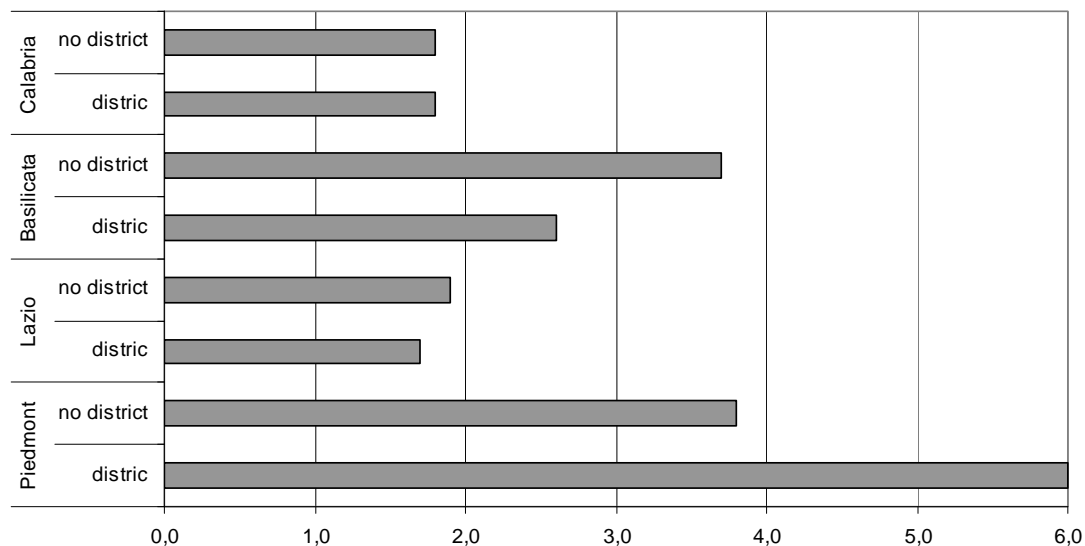
The dissimilarity index (tab.5) confirms the district effect in Montagna Reatina with high values of dissimilarity with respect to off-district rural areas. Here, the district farms have fully exploited the opportunities the policy have them offered, shown real differences with respect to off-district rural areas. Differences among rural farms emerge also in the district of Appennino Centrale, while, the hypothesis of territorial indifference seems to characterise farms of the other rural districts.

**Table 5.** Dissimilarity index.

Appennino Centrale Umbro Marchigiano	0,40
Colli Esini	0,10
Maremma	0,10
Montagna Reatina	0,80

### *Agrifood districts*

As said in the methodological note, agrifood districts are specialised in fruits and vegetables and are localised in different geographical Italian contexts. As a consequence, different intensities of the district effect have been found. Figure 2 illustrates the grants obtained in each district, showing the high performance of the district localised in Piedmont: farms belonging to the district have get a significantly higher number of contributions with respect to off-district farms. In the other cases, however, a negative district effect emerges, with a similar or a lower number of grants obtained in district contexts.



**Figure 2.** Number of grants perceived.

Source: elaborations from database RICA-REA

The articulation of the measures, reported in table 6, permits an in-deep analysis of these effects.

**Table 6.** Average funds received by farms for some type of policies.

	investments	generational exchange	diversification and valorisation	income integration	environmental payments	average payments	average investments
province of Alessandria							
per farm							
district	1130,2	333,3	38,3	1890,9	7382,2	9273,1	1501,8
no district	165,0	89,1	85,2	802,0	3870,0	4671,9	339,3
per hectare							
district	64,0	18,9	2,2	107,2	418,3	525,5	85,1
no district	17,7	9,6	9,2	86,2	415,8	501,9	36,5
Province of Latina							
per farm							
district	321,4	595,2	3,0	339,2	916,7	1255,8	919,7
no district	293,8	3448,7	15,3	1547,8	2348,7	3896,4	3757,7
per hectare							
district	47,2	87,3	0,4	49,8	134,5	184,3	135,0
no district	29,1	341,3	1,5	153,2	232,4	385,6	371,8
Metapontino							
per farm							
district	130,8	31,2	20,4	1555,9	1920,2	3476,1	182,4
no district	1555,6	0,0	93,1	2195,9	8581,8	10777,7	1648,7
per hectare							
district	10,2	2,4	1,6	121,8	150,3	272,1	14,3
no district	57,7	0,0	3,5	81,4	318,1	399,5	61,1
Sibari							
per farm							
district	0,0	0,0	272,2	3139,3	2443,0	5582,3	272,2
no district	0,0	0,0	1,5	3357,1	4233,2	7590,3	1,5
per hectare							
district	0,0	0,0	6,3	72,1	56,1	128,3	6,3
no district	0,0	0,0	0,1	272,6	343,8	616,4	0,1

Source: elaborations from database RICA-REA

In the district of Alessandria a higher capability to gain access to policies emerges; with the only exception of the qualification measures, the other measures show the prevalence of district farm with respect to off-district ones, both per farm and per hectare. The voices relative to investments are particularly significant, with the in district farms that evidence an average grant per farms five times higher than off-district farms. Inside the investments a relevant voice is relative to funds in order to stimulate generational exchange. In the province of Latina the district effect is lower, limited to structural investments; for the other measures, the in district farms show a less propensity to consume policies with respect to off-district farms. The southern districts exhibit opposite performance: in Metapontino the belonging to district does not give any chance to local farms to obtain higher levels of funding than external farms. In contrast, the Sibari district denotes high performance respect to off-farm district in some important voices, like policies for diversification and qualification of agricultural products<sup>2</sup>. The results of dissimilarity index confirm the differences, with diverse values among different territories (tab.7). In the province of Alessandria and Latina the district effect is evident and give an important role to farm rooted in the district area. In Metapontino the dissimilarity index is high but not in the sense of district effect, but exactly on the contrary point of view.

<sup>2</sup> The result of Sibari district has to take into account the reduced available data, above all for the investments. The low value of dissimilarity index is a clear consequence of it.



**Table 7.** Dissimilarity index.

Province of Alessandria	0,30
Province of Latina	0,40
Metapontino	0,50
Sibari	0,12

### Not conclusive remarks

The possibility to exploit the opportunities from the recent rural development policies depends on farm's capability to get access to policy markets. The paper has tried to test differences among territories with similar characteristics, in terms of rural attributes or agricultural specialization, but defined as rural or agrifood district. The district effect, which has been deeply analysed in the past literature on local LFS, has been investigated with reference to the capability to gain access to agricultural and rural development policies.

The paper is not to be considered as final work, it needs some further research to interpret the real motivation of a different access to policy market; the hypothesis of different transaction costs in the consumption of policies is an open field of research in the neoinstitutional vein of studies. However, in this paper we think we have opened an interesting topic of research in the analysis of LFS that could be enlarged in future researches to really catch the way farms consume policies in a different way within different LFS.

The hypothesis of a district atmosphere even in the consumption of policies is confirmed, even if in not all the considered districts. This different behaviour has been articulated on the basis of rural or agrifood districts.

In the case of rural districts, the average propensity to consume policy is higher relating to off-district rural areas. Looking at the single measures, some differences emerge. Maremma is the most attractive area to obtain grants; particularly attractive are the measure for young farmers and for the investments. On the other side, a lower level of incentive for qualification and diversification are present. Montagna Reatina, show the highest level of dissimilarity index, underlining the difference among in and off-district farms: district effects are present in all considered measures. Besides, this area points out intense processes of boundary shift by consuming policies for diversification and valorisation of agricultural products. In the two rural districts of Umbria and Marche the research points out a limited efficacy of district effect. As said in the methodological note, they are not officially recognised districts: one is in progress, the other is self-recognised.

In the case of agrifood district some geographical differences emerge; the district localised in the north of Italy shows the highest efficacy of the district effect, confirming the abundant literature on social capital in the north of Italy. Either in terms of average propensity to consume policies, or in terms of the amount perceived for each measure, the district of Alessandria shows high performance with respect to other fruit and vegetable district and in relation to off-district areas. In the other districts the results are not homogeneous, evidencing the existence of a district effect in limited cases or measures.

The test on district effect even in the access to policies introduces us to two order of consideration: the first one is related to the strong heterogeneity pointed out in the empirical research; it is clear that the relevance of district elements is present in not all the considered district areas; this should induce more caution in recognizing of a district which, it is not useless to remember, is an efficient model of territorial organization of firms and institutions, where productive and socialisation spaces cross in a virtuous circle that fosters local development. The excessive optimism which characterises the district as a tool of political economy should not avoid a rigorous methodology for its recognising. The second consideration refers to the presence of district effect even in the access to the market of policies, which has consequences in normative terms: first of all, the competition for the access to policies for agriculture and rural development takes into no account district dimension: the growing complexity and the more participatory criteria to access policies induce a reflexion on the possibility

to stress the district as distinctive element to gain access to policy. Secondly, the presence of district effects should be protected even in the access to policies: the occurrence of transaction cost linked to the consumption of policies could induce the district farms to renounce to consume policies, encouraging a sort of conscious not-consumption. Finally looking at the 2007-2013 programming period, the higher complexity to obtain funds should introduce policy solution that encourage the district dimension and the empowering of district ingredients within the different kind of LFS.

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