

BIO-DISTRICTS to boost organic production

The best practices of BioDistretto Cilento

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Key words: bio-district, sustainability.

Author's Background

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Summary

A bio-district is an area where farmers, citizens, tourist operators, associations and public authorities enter into an agreement for a sustainable management of local resources, based on organic farming.

The first bio-district was launched in Italy in 2009. After 4 years, the bio-district now includes 30 municipalities, 400 SMEs, 20 restaurants and 10 tourist establishments and it constitutes a permanent workshop of culturally significant ideas and initiatives.

Background

A bio-district is a geographical area where farmers, citizens, tourist operators, associations and public authorities enter into an agreement for the sustainable management of local resources, based on organic production and consumption (short food chain, purchasing groups, organic canteens in public offices and schools). In bio-districts, the promotion of organic produce is inextricably linked with the promotion of the land and its special characteristics so that it can fully realise its economic, social and cultural potential.

The first bio-district was launched in Italy in 2009 by the AIAB Associazione Italiana per l'Agricoltura Biologica (Italian Association for Organic Agriculture) in an area inside the National Park of the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni. After 3 years, the Cilento bio-district now includes 30 municipalities, 400 enterprises, 20 restaurants and 10 tourist establishments that use local organic produce. Today it constitutes a permanent national and international workshop of culturally significant ideas and initiatives aimed at fair trade and local development founded on the organic production model.

Having seen the economic, environmental and social impact of the Cilento Biodistrict, the Associazione Italiana per l'Agricoltura Biologica, which launched this innovative practice, is actively engaged in promoting and coordinating bio-districts in other areas of the country. Bio-districts have been set up in Grecanico in the Calabria Region, Via Amerina and Forre in the Lazio Region, and Greve in Chianti in the Tuscany Region.

The association also promotes the creation of Mediterranean and international bio-district networks and works closely with the European Union in campaigns to promote organic production.

Main Chapter

Core Message - What problem does it help solve?

A territorial bio-district is an innovative solution, in line with the aims agreed at the United Nations World Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, in particular the Action Plan of Agenda 21, which orients the policies of countries towards sustainable development in which local authorities play a central role.

Bio-districts are also in line with the Declaration of Nyéléni, Sélingué (Mali 2007), which declares food sovereignty as the right of peoples to have nutritious and culturally appropriate foods, which are accessible and produced in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way, and the right of peoples to decide their own food production systems.

In the framework of these international commitments, promoting the culture of organic food and the territorial approach means orienting development towards the conservation of resources, environmental compatibility, the valorisation of local differences and, thus, the quality of life. In particular, bio-districts help promote the organic model in the framework of rural development and fair trade, valorising natural and typical products of an area and the area itself, contributing to a form of economic development that benefits tourism and is based on the respect and valorisation of local resources.

Food strategies are changing and it is no longer a question of getting individual enterprises to adopt an eco-sustainable model but the focus is now whole areas with an organic vocation. The aim, therefore, is to put forward a global model

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capable of giving concrete answers to: social needs for greater environmental quality, less densely populated rural areas, perennial financial crises, and climate emergencies, by promoting innovations in the field of research, production standards, alternative distribution channels, and in the sphere of certification.

Bio-districts can help face challenges in six main areas:

- ✓ Mix Farming, agriculture that mixes crop production with animal husbandry and the new frontiers of sustainability (energy, water, biodiversity, quality of life and work).
- ✓ Land access, which is increasingly difficult for those who do not have substantial economic resources and in particular for young people who wish to become farmers. Bio-districts can promote a veritable "agricultural renaissance", marking a break with the past and using the organic model as a reference point for agriculture as a whole, such as to give a new lease of life to state-owned land and uncultivated land, making agricultural work once again a respectable and profitable occupation.
- ✓ Fairer relations in the supply chain, establishing direct relations between producers and consumers, adopting alternative distribution channels such as the short supply chain and fair trade groups, and urging public authorities to buy more local produce for canteens in schools, hospitals and other public facilities.
- ✓ Food sovereignty, granting local communities the right to decide for themselves what to produce and how to produce it.
- ✓ Simplified organic produce certification system, making it less bureaucratic, more effective and inclusive, making use of "group certification" and "participatory guarantee systems".
- ✓ Organic communication, this must also focus on the "short supply chain", bringing the communicators and recipients closer together to highlight the ethical, social, and environmental values of organic production.

Particularly important qualitative aspect is also the work in the field of social agriculture, promoting and supporting cooperatives and farms which, in addition to producing food, perform the social activities of creating employment and offering a therapeutic service for the disadvantaged. Social agriculture has yet to be codified at national, European or international level. The term, though, refers to all the practices used in agriculture and in rural contexts to generate inclusive benefits, such as social inclusion and work placement for the disadvantaged and the marginalized. Social agriculture also involves providing services to people and communities that are "fragile", generating territorial development and making up for the deficiencies of the centralized welfare state.

Bio-District Cilento and AIAB are also promoting the establishment of an international network which will bring together similar experience in order to work out guide lines and technical assistance to those rural communities who want to implement and establish new bio-district.

Core messages and conclusions

Assessment of the socio - economic and environmental impact of the bio-district shows that prospects are very encouraging. Demand for organic products is growing, and the overall shortening of the supply chain has generated loyal customers, boosting development in the sector, with more and more farms becoming multifunctional and converting to organic produce. Further impetus is expected from the future application of new simplified organic certification procedures. The bio-district has encouraged tourists to try typical local products and explore the local culture, increasing tourist flows throughout the year and not just in the summer months.

Many state-owned lands have switched to organic farming. From an environmental perspective, a number of initiatives have been implemented to protect and valorise the landscape and natural features of rural areas. The conversion of new agricultural enterprises to organic farming will also help reduce the negative impacts of production on the environment.

The International Biodistrict Network is committed to the promotion and coordination of bio-districts on international scale, using the experience of the Cilento Bio-District as a workshop of replicable practices and providing technical support to local communities.