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Sustainable rural development: The role of traditional activities in Central Italy

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ABSTRACT

Traditional farming systems and other activities such as craftsmanship (e.g. manufacturing activities, local food production), represent a sustainable example of human integration with nature. Their maintenance and development, with opportune adaptations to the current socio-economic situation and cultural/technological advancements, are therefore valuable. Under the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), preference will be given to projects with a participative approach presented for funding covered by the Common Strategic Framework 2014–2020 programming. The challenge is to integrate participatory planning, people's attitude to traditional work with the European strategy for rural development. LEADER actions are an effective tool suitable for the implementation of such local development policies.

In this paper, a ground-breaking attitude model to traditional activities has been developed. A questionnaire was compiled on the basis of current literature on attitude models and distributed to the community of a rural area in Central Italy (six municipalities). The data gathered were statistically analysed by structural equation modelling (SEM). The results obtained allow several factors influencing attitude to be identified as well as highlighting the difference in the responses of farmers and artisans compared with those of the rest of the community.

In addition, several strategies (leverage points) have been defined for an efficient rural development of the study area in line with peoples' perception. Such strategies would be capable of strengthening residents' sense of place and transforming the local community into a more resilient and adaptive socio-ecological system, capable in turn of ensuring and preserving the ecosystem services provided. Specifically, all the suggested actions aim to increase cohesion among citizens and institutions, to strengthen the sense of community and to promote the creation of local networks, an essential prerequisite to the setting up of Local Action Groups, as programmed by the European Strategy for Rural Development.

The novelty of the work lies in the use of SEM for the definition of leverage points, following Meadows' classification proposed within systems theory (Meadows, 2009).

This paper, by focusing on local traditional activities as a leverage point, puts forward recommendations for planners and policy makers, and opens a different perspective on today's increased need for rural re-development and social innovation.

1. Introduction

Rural areas are places where traditions, cultural heritages and nature are intricately interwoven in a fragile equilibrium which is often metastable (Antrop, 2005; Gobattoni et al., 2011; Pelorosso et al., 2011). Indeed, rural landscapes can maintain their identity, self-stabilization and organization capacity only over a limited range of perturbations, and they may eventually undergo significant alterations if socio-ecological conditions continue to change. Agriculture has long been, and still is, one of the main driving forces shaping landscape; however, since the 1950s, the role played by the agricultural sector in society has considerably changed as a consequence of mechanization and technological advances, globalisation processes and new social needs (Randelli et al., 2014; Van Eupen et al., 2012). In post-war Europe, industrialization and new demographic trends have led to the Urbanization phenomenon (Schewenius et al., 2014) with the rapid growth of cities, soil sealing through increased building and the depopulation of rural areas (Crafts and Toniolo, 1996). Crop intensification in productive

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and fertile regions has been observed while the depopulation and abandonment of marginal rural areas have become ever more evident (Crafts and Toniolo, 1996; Pelorosso et al., 2009; Pelorosso et al., 2011). The profound transformations experienced by agriculture have impacted not only on rural community economy, employment and social dynamics, but also on nature and the environment (Schouten et al., 2013; Hanley et al., 2012; McManus et al., 2012) and, in general, on the supply of so-called ecosystem and landscape services (De Groot et al., 2010; Hermann et al., 2011; Zanten et al., 2014). Taking into consideration the ecosystem services classification of millennium ecosystem assessment (MEA, 2003), these transformation processes have provoked heavy consequences on regulating services (e.g. worsening air quality and increasing hydrogeological risk), supporting (e.g. reduction in habitat) and provisioning services (e.g. the disappearance of traditional food and loss of forest productivity). The impact has also been felt on cultural services in terms of the loss of opportunities for tourism and recreational activities, reduction of aesthetic value of landscapes as loss of natural scenery and of appreciable "greenness" features (Zanten et al., 2014).

As a consequence, many cultural heritages are at risk and social systems can be forced into undesirable and quite sudden changes. Typical farming systems and other activities handed down and practised in the past (e.g. artisanship, including for example, wood processing, iron works, cheese-making or wine production) may then disappear.

Traditional work activities, such as extensive agriculture or craftsmanship (e.g. hand-made decorative objects and food production), have usually been characterized by a low level of natural resources exploitation and by a high regard for the innate vocation (e.g. farming, pasture) and specificity (e.g. climate, geomorphology, soil fertility) of a territory: for these activities, the use (and re-use) of wastes and local resources allowed a dynamic and resilient landscape to be constructed, where productive cycles were closed and the social and environmental capitals were conserved (Leone et al., 2014). Traditionally, work activities were better integrated with nature. Their processes were connected with environmental systems interacting functionally with them in a dynamic equilibrium and producing a perceived beautiful and harmonic landscape, as a result of the integration between human activities and nature, as stated in the Florence European Convention on Landscape (Council of Europe, 2000).

The interplay of anthropic and natural components is at the basis of the concept of sustainability, in which different dimensions act: social, economic, environmental and institutional aspects interlink contributing to the complex mechanisms that lie behind sustainable development (Valentin and Spangenberg, 2000). Thus, today, the preservation of traditional and landscape-linked activities, with opportune adaptations to the current socio-economic situation, cultural/technological advancements and environmental changes, should be one of the main issues taken into consideration in policy and territorial management.

To deal with the need for sustainable development, a multidisciplinary integration is compellingly required (Zurlini et al., 2013) with an approach that should reinforce the social and human capital while improving economic success (Costanza et al., 2009).

High levels of social capital within a community enable people to coordinate their activities with the aim of achieving mutual benefits, increasing social cohesion and mitigating opportunistic behaviours. In this view, understanding the relationships that local populations have with the place where they live and how they perceive it, appears of fundamental importance for the definition of effective strategies towards collective outcomes and common goals. The different relationships that populations have with the landscape, and the different values attributed to the landscape, influence the practices and activities that are shaping the landscape (Leone et al., 2014). The attitude of a community towards traditional activities may therefore be a fundamental factor in the effectiveness of landscape management strategies. Attitude, as defined by Ajzen (2001) is an evaluative judgement of an object that can be considered as good–bad, harmful–beneficial, pleasant–unpleasant, likeable–dislikeable: this judgement is based on the subjective beliefs we form about that object, but it is also influenced by feeling states and emotions (Agarwal and Malhotra, 2005). Attitude is affected by the socio-economic context in which people live and, at the same time, attitudes are significant for understanding and predicting social behaviour (Ajzen, 2001). To this aim, it becomes really useful to understand the attitude of a community towards traditional activities in order to discern the drivers that guide people's choices in remaining in the place where they live and in adopting a sustainable life style.

Several attitude models have been developed in social psychology and applied in research on environmental resources (e.g. Ko and Stewart, 2002; Larson and Santelmann, 2007). Eagly and Chaiken (1993) propose a well-known tripartite model based on a cognitive, an affective and a behavioural factor to explain attitude as a key influence of behaviour (Ajzen, 2001; Ajzen and Fishbein, 2011). The cognitive factor concerns rational evaluation of an object on the basis of its attributes, the affective component is related to an individual's feelings about an object while the behavioural factor is linked to past behaviours triggered by an object and/or in relation to the object itself. Baur et al. (2013) applied this tripartite model in Portland, Oregon to examine, users' and nonusers' attitudes to city nature parks. However, to the authors' knowledge, attitude to traditional activities in a rural community has never been studied.

A close scrutiny of rural communities' perceptions about their territory is, therefore, the first and essential step for identifying the territorial potential of rural areas and to identify the most effective actions for maintaining their natural and cultural capitals and, at the same time, promoting social innovation, for example, by changing unsustainable behaviours and removing structural constraints. However, these rural settings are nested in environmental and also political and economic contexts, which influence and impact the final success of any development strategy (Trabalzi and De Rosa, 2012). As De Snoo et al. (2013) report, only an enduring change in farmers' motivation and habits towards more sustainable actions can counteract the loss of biodiversity and landscape quality.

The challenge is therefore to start virtuous mechanisms to initiate rural communities into a more economically and socially sustainable development focusing on the combination of different kinds of knowledge. The latter should be gleaned not only from experts but also from local actors, in order to identify and implement opportune strategies of intervention and collective actions that could be accepted by farmers and citizens and integrated into their daily behaviour. Thus, the maintenance and development of traditional farming systems and other activities such as craftsmanship, adapted to the actual socio-economic, cultural/technological and environmental conditions are clearly valuable.

Under the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), preference will be given to projects with a participative approach presented for funding covered by the Common Strategic Framework 2014–2020 programming. The LEADER approach, second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy since 2003 is based on a participatory approach and on the involvement of local partnerships – between entrepreneurs, institutions and the voluntary sector – forming a Local Action Group (LAG) as a kind of a public–private partnership in order to design and implement Local Development Strategies (LDS).

The challenge is to integrate participatory planning, people's attitude to traditional work with the European strategy for rural development. LEADER actions are an effective tool suitable for the implementation of such local development policies. However, iden-