



# Dealing with agriculture, environment and landscape in spatial planning: A discussion about the Italian case study

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## ABSTRACT

Only a few decades have passed since when in Italy spatial planning considered the countryside as an indistinct “blank space” only deserving marginal attentions. At the same time it is well known that the outcomes of the spatial and economic planning systems developed and tested over the past decades have been showing their critical poor suitability compared to the complexity of the socioeconomic system, which calls for specific planning policies, differentiated according to the various features, vocations, expressions and attitudes of the countryside. Therefore, the rural space experienced a long time after urban areas the use of specific spatial planning criteria aimed at a well-ordered, efficient, and sustainable development and a better quality of the settlement system, crucial issues which still wait for thorough and final answers. Moreover, the following issues have become more and more topical: the importance of defining specific planning policies for rural areas, and the need to go beyond the identification of zones to be intended for a specific and homogeneous type of development, by carrying out an ever more focussed and proper classification of rural areas. This paper reports the results of a critical discussion about the above-mentioned themes. The work is part of a broader research dealing with the development of a research model aimed to define a new idea of “spatial units”, meant as analytical and design tools suitable to support syntheses of land-use, economic, agricultural, and landscape planning.

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## Introduction and goals of the study

In several European contexts the deep socio-economic changes which started after World War II have caused transformations of rural areas which proved relevant because of their wide diffusion, high intensity and low reversibility. At the same time, also due to the changes in the settlement system of most urban, metropolitan and megapolitan centres, rural areas have become more and more strategic reservoir of resources, processes and knowledge essential for the quality of life (Zasada, 2011; Lange et al., 2008).

The most recent EU policies for rural development assign to agriculture a multifunctional role, assuming and promoting its social, ecological and environmental values, which add to its economic functions (Tassinari, 2008). Rural areas are also of great importance from a political and cultural point of view, also in relation to how positively populations consider them (Sevenant and Antrop, 2009, 2010). Moreover, their natural and cultural landscapes often represent a valuable heritage offering tourist and recreational attraction.

However, only a few decades have passed since when in Italy spatial planning considered the countryside as an indistinct “blank

space” only deserving marginal attentions. There is no doubt that the rural space experienced a long time after urban areas the use of specific spatial planning criteria aimed at a well-ordered and sustainable development, an efficient land-use management, and a better quality of the settlement system, crucial issues which still wait for thorough and final answers.

Recently, the above-mentioned fundamental role of the countryside in the overall quality of landscape and environment came increasingly to the fore, more than just stating its dignity neglected for quite a long time, in consideration of the awareness of the importance of giving it specific planning attentions. In this regards Claval (2005) focussed on the various meanings of rural landscapes and underlined the need for an integrated planning of the different land uses of the countryside. The concept of landscape as an integrating and holistic entity was taken up by Antrop (2006) as a key step within decision making processes for planning sustainable landscapes. At the same time, nowadays it is well known that such actions must focus on the various different features of rural landscape. The ever increasing complexity in the economic and social organization has determined different needs for what concerns planning and programming strategies and actions, which vary depending on the location in the countryside. Van Eetvelde and Antrop (2009) developed a landscape typology characterization model through the combination of holistic and parametric approaches, for applications on the Belgium study case. De Jong and

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Spaans (2009) analysed the trade-offs schemes in regional planning processes between rural and urban land-uses, and underlined that the adoption of methods suitable to improve space quality calls for a firm active role of the local government and the institutional frame within the planning process.

In Italy the consideration for the landscape, cultural and environmental values of rural areas, and in particular the need for a new and innovative planning approach of their landscape and cultural mosaic, prove to be highly topical within the most recent planning and programming policies. This goal is clear in several laws, some of which have become remarkable in terms of progress in the approach to rural landscape planning: it is worth mentioning the Regional Law of Emilia-Romagna no. 20/2000 (Emilia-Romagna Region, 2000), and the Regional Law of Lombardy no. 12/2005 (Lombardy Region, 2005).

This therefore makes it a priority the development of effective analytical and design tools capable of providing adequate answers to the changed and changing characteristics of this dynamic and articulated system, the countryside.

This paper reports the results of a critical discussion about the above-mentioned themes, although a thorough synthesis of the planning tools in force is not provided, as it lies outside the aims of the study. The work is part of a broader research dealing with the definition of criteria and tools for the land-use and landscape analysis and planning of rural areas. The paper is developed with particular reference to analyses at the municipal and inter-municipal level, typical of the planning tools directly operative. The work aims at making contributions to the issue of landscape planning, deeply interdisciplinary, by developing specific themes characteristic of the scientific field of agricultural, forestry and biosystems engineering: land-use management of rural areas, integration of agricultural, environmental and planning policies, rural landscape planning and the role of the farming system for the implementation of spatial planning decisions. The evolution of these aspects in Italy has been analysed, then the main challenges in land-use planning of rural areas have been considered, with reference to the various sectorial policies, the regulation framework and the relevant scientific literature. In particular some aspects of an analytical and planning model developed by the authors have been proposed, as examples of an integrated approach to the characterization of rural areas for planning purposes.

### The origins of the rural “urban-planning”

Since the early decades of the twentieth century, even in a political and social atmosphere which permeated significantly the technical and professional environment, many scholars were increasingly turning their attention to the various problems of rural areas. They aimed at their rational development, even if in a scenario in which their multifunctional nature was far from emerging with the today's awareness. The priorities in that period mainly dealt with the agricultural production, its important effects on the employment, and the inherent primary needs of a healthy and rational organization of the work and living places.

The need for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the issues of the countryside and the important role of land-use planning in achieving a good management of its resources were already discussed by engineers, agronomists and other technicians.

Particular attention was paid to the need for urban planning to “... cross the circle of the town walls, go beyond and turn its thoughts and efforts to consider the surrounding landscape ...”, since its goal is not so much – or not only – a matter of a proper management of houses and infrastructure as of the creation of “... the most suitable social, technical, and economic environment for the development of the various activities...” (Chiodi, 1938).

Several themes which are still nowadays highly topical were already also studied, even if in a context which is now changed due to the deep socioeconomic evolutions. We can mention the importance of studying the local peculiarities, as well as considering and safeguarding the intrinsic structural characters (vocations) and the settled expressions (traditions) of the countryside, since “... if the town Urban planning follows more general and well-known rules, the rural Urban-planning shows characters and aspects heavily varying depending on the local features and situations...” (Chiodi, 1938). We can also quote the theme of the proper consideration of the relationship between the city and the countryside. Not only agricultural and livestock activities could have negative impacts on urban areas, but also – vice versa – the countryside needed protection from the city through a containment of its expansion and an enhancement of farmlands aimed at an environmental improvement of the city itself: “... the outer agricultural areas should be protected ... controlling and strengthening them and safeguarding the existence of large areas of marginal land capable of representing the necessary reserves for the city's breathing...” (Chiodi, 1938).

The need to consider the social, physical and environmental nature of rural areas, in addition to their economic function, therefore, arises when rural land-use planning is conceived as “... the arrangement of soil, environment and population ... a necessary complement of the town Urban-planning ...” considering “... through an organic approach the problems related to demography, constructions, roads, transport, public facilities, agricultural and industrial production of each zone ...” (Chiodi, 1938).

The need to plan the countryside according to a proper system of rules and policies increased later in the second half of the twentieth century, when also the issue of a fast and quality reconstruction became urgent. “... We must study and define a program, an organic plan. The words urban and planning (for the countryside a neologism has been created, ruralistics) still frighten for no reason too many people, including many technicians. We must come to a planning scheme, or we will fail to achieve the goal of reconstructing properly and in a reasonably short time ...” (Departmental Inspectorate for Agriculture of the Emilia Region, 1946; Edallo, 1946). This process, whose embryonic stages, even if not directly relevant to the rural areas, can be traced back to the passing in 1942 of the first Italian law on spatial planning, introduced significant changes in the regulatory framework about the conformation of the rural built environment. Since 1967, due to the so-called bridge law which extended to the entire territory the need for a building permit issued by the municipal authority,<sup>1</sup> also the construction of rural buildings became subject to town planning regulation and law. These terms are now replaced by that of land-use management, more appropriate to include all the non-urban and thus also rural areas. The following year, the extension to the whole territory of the zoning laws introduced in rural areas, classified as “E zones” by the municipal planning schemes, a 0.03 m<sup>3</sup>/m<sup>2</sup> threshold defined in terms of built-up area density, aimed at limiting the construction of new housing developments.<sup>2</sup>

This started a process of improvement of the spatial planning tools for the rural areas. Although slowly, it advanced progressively, until a strong boost came with the recent regional laws on land-use management. These intervened to reform the subject, on which the Italian Parliament has not still succeeded in issuing a national framework law. A system of rules and conventions, recognized as necessary limitations to the individual freedom to advantage of the priority safeguard of the common good, has thus been progressively refined and articulated. Also quality criteria and heritage

<sup>1</sup> See the art. no. 10 of the Law no. 765/1967, which provides for changes and integrations in the art. no. 31 of the Italian National town-planning Law no. 1150/1942.

<sup>2</sup> See the art. no. 7 of the D.M. no. 1444/1968.

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