

# Organic Farming and Sustainable Rural Development: A Multifaceted and Promising Convergence

Patrizia Pugliese

Over the past few years EC aids have fostered the conversion of large areas of agricultural land into organic farming practices. The organic sector has concomitantly and gradually set up a commercial organization to cater to the growing and ever more sophisticated demands of consumers. What was once a niche for few health-crazed individuals cultivating a different life style and different eating habits has progressively established itself in the agricultural world and in society at large, thus mobilizing both human and financial resources. Its popularity has some interesting facets to it, especially when one considers the delicate transition period rural areas are currently experiencing.

Mainly the structural, technical and commercial aspects of organic farming have been investigated up to now, while the many natural points of communality organic farming shares with the concept of sustainable rural development have not been extensively explored. In this paper it is argued that there exists a convergence between the notion and implementation of sustainable rural development and some key features of the modern organic movement. A specifically tailored framework of analysis and interpretation is proposed to focus on multiple linkages and synergies existing between the two. The evolutionary perspective and the network analysis approach, adopted by some contemporary rural sociologists<sup>1</sup> are the main theoretical references of the proposed framework. This consists of four cornerstones, corresponding to four main liaisons existing between organic farming and sustainable rural development, namely, innovation, conservation, participation, and integration, which are discussed with specific reference to organic farming principles and practices, current rural policies and empirical evidence of initiatives of rural development stemming from the spread of organic farming systems.

## **'Sustainable rural development': origins and main features**

### *The origins of the concept*

The broadly accepted concept of 'sustainable rural development' merges different theories and experiences. It mainly combines the 1980s theories on sustainability<sup>2</sup> with new strands of thought in rural development resulting from criticism of the

modernization of agriculture occurring in 20th century. During the past decades, increasing environmental awareness and progressive acknowledgement of the complex, imperfectly known and predictable interaction between economy, ecology and society generated the notion of 'sustainable development.' According to it, economic growth should be pursued concomitantly with the improvement of human welfare and the conservation of natural resources. The intrinsic diversity and complexity of ecological and social systems should be preserved in order to increase or, at least, not to undermine their stability and erode their resilience. Moreover, sustainability relies upon the co-evolutionary interpretation of reality. Assuming that people and nature co-evolve under the influence of mutual selective pressures, it fosters an understanding of the world, which acknowledges the complex and dynamic interrelatedness of evolving patterns within and between systems (Norgaard 1992).

The process of agricultural modernization, as induced in the second half of the past century in developed and in many developing countries, is patently inconsistent with the principles of sustainability and with the related notion of 'sustainable agriculture.' For the sake of boosting productivity, many agricultural lands have undergone massive transformation because of the introduction of western organizational models of labour and production patterns and of externally developed technological packages. Both were assumed to be universally applicable, irrespective of local social and environmental contexts. Therefore, despite the positive impact on the overall availability of food, the spread of high external input agriculture has caused some major problems (Pretty 1995): uneven distribution of benefits, serious deterioration of farmers' socio-economic conditions, dangerous 'human erosion' (Lernoud 1999), due to displacement and marginalization effects, and to progressive disempowering of local institutions and individuals; significant environmental degradation. Current declining performances of modernized agriculture and its negative side effects have been experienced worldwide. As a result, the notions of 'sustainable agriculture' and 'sustainable rural development' have emerged. They adopt the 'endogenous development paradigm,' give prominence to low-input, resource-conserving farming systems, and emphasize the multifunctional role of agriculture.

### *Defining sustainable rural development*

Sustainable rural development can be defined as a process of multidimensional change affecting rural systems (Polidori and Romano 1996). Economic growth, improvement of social conditions, and conservation of natural values are all equally important features in sustainable rural development, which should be induced according to a bottom-up approach, through a participated and sustainable use of local endogenous resources (environment, labour force, knowledge, patterns of production, consumption, and communication). Sustainable rural communities should be able to recognize and internalize exogenous chances of growth, i.e. markets, policies, and technology opportunities, properly integrating and balancing them with the need to preserve and enhance rural specificities and diversity (Long and Van der Ploeg 1994). Farmers and rural people are thus assigned an active role and identified as primary economic and social actors in the determination of *their* development options, in the control over the development process and in the retention of the benefits.

Among the differentiated developmental paths currently available to rural areas, in the sustainable approach agriculture still plays a central role, despite its declining importance worldwide in economic terms and for the labour market. In the era of the 'pluralization of the rural' (Jones 1995), i.e. of the increasing number of discourses, interests, and conflicts centred around rural areas, defined as 'arenas' (Lowe et al. 1993), farmers are just one of the players negotiating spaces and power, together with landowners, new residents, conservationists, tourists and entrepreneurs of the secondary and tertiary sectors. A gradual shift from a sectoral to a spatial focus is affecting the rural economy resulting in a progressive detachment from the exclusive production of food and fibre and in a concomitant increasing reliance on a service economy, tailored on the new needs of urban society (Lowe 1996). Although some of the latter (e.g. housing, business relocation, and certain kinds of outdoor recreation) cannot be easily reconciled with the carrying out of farming activities, agriculture can still have a pivotal and catalyzing part in meeting other equally relevant demands placed on the countryside: rural tourism, the preservation of rural landscapes and traditions, environmental education, the production of healthy, typical food. In this respect, the very role of agriculture is in the process of being redefined and farmers are being called upon to acquire new skills and competences (Hervey 1997). Thus, the diversification of rural economy and agricultural pluriactivity are important developing trends, which can be strategically devised to transform urban-rural geographical adjacency into sustainable multifunctional linkages.

Coherently, sustainable rural development only relies on resource-conserving forms of agriculture<sup>3</sup> and implies the respect and the enhancement of local agricultural knowledge and traditions and of farm organizational patterns. These are described by van der Ploeg (1994) as local 'styles of farming,' exclusively resulting from a historically and geographically contingent process of social construction and negotiation in which rural actors interact with external driving factors. However, according to Goodman (1999), sustainability would entail re-conceptualizing the 'styles of farming' in terms of relational co-productions of nature and society. Such a change in perspective would recognize both human and natural agents as active relational entities and surmount the reductionist dichotomy between nature and society, which still characterizes many current analytical perspectives.

### *Investigating sustainable rural development*

The centrality of the co-evolutionary paradigm in sustainability theories has interesting methodological implications for the investigation and interpretation of rural contexts and processes. Co-evolutionary theories underpin some modern rural sociologists' evolutionary perspective and their use of the network analysis approach for the exploration of rural systems. Evolutionary ideas conform to the 'integrative' vision of reality implied by sustainability (Dovers and Handmer 1992) and provide scientists with a coherent and powerful research approach to address sustainable development issues. In particular, the evolutionary perspective allows to develop a holistic understanding of processes occurring in a specific context. At the same time, it enables to capture a dynamic perception of the continuous, unpredictable transformations undergone by the various components of the analyzed system and to explore the complexity of their multiple interactions.

Allason et al. (1994) demonstrate that such an approach can be conveniently applied to investigating the changes currently affecting rural spaces and communities. It offers scope for a unified vision of these profound, interrelated processes, leading to the integration of economic and ecological concerns into social analysis. According to the same authors 'the rural' is a 'complex, dynamic, open system,' "made and remade by a complex amalgam of the social, the economic, the natural, the technical, the local and the global." Within the rural economy it is possible to identify a number of interacting social, economic, natural, cultural and political sub-systems, which are conceived of as undergoing a process of mutual co-evolution. In such systems, "open to the exchange of people, goods, services, information and so on," actors and agents are necessarily bound into fluid and changeable networks.

More specifically, drawing upon the work of Callon (1986), Latour (1987) and Clark and Lowe (1992), Murdoch (1994) proposes the concept of a "hybrid, composite network, made up of heterogeneous materials, including humans, non-humans, texts, technical objects, money, etc."; in other words, a system which integrates the social, the policy, and the technical networks, plus natural and inanimate elements (Ray and Woodward 1997). Thus, to a certain extent, the rural economy can be perceived as the result of the co-evolution and intertwining of these systems of relations. Against this backdrop, the network analysis approach can be used to understand how agents and actors become incorporated into these relations, how key actors come to exercise power over others, how they use heterogeneous materials to struggle, dominate or enroll others (Murdoch 1994). The network analysis approach allows researchers to follow the process of network building and to observe how actors and systems co-evolve.

In this light, together with evolutionary formulations, the network analysis approach constitutes a flexible, multidisciplinary framework to conceptualize and investigate rural issues and their implications for sustainable development<sup>4</sup>. In particular, it may be argued, the evolutionary notion of 'the rural' and the network analysis approach illustrated so far can be conveniently adopted to study specific rural phenomena characterized by dynamism, intense networking, and multivalence of involved actors and interests. The recent, broad and rapid spread of organic farming is markedly one of those.

### **Organic farming as an alternative type of agriculture**

Organic farming is but one of the options for environmentally sustainable agricultural production. Surely, it is the most radical form of sustainable agriculture and the only approach which has long been defined and implemented within the framework of a complex system of laws and regulations<sup>5</sup> that have progressively become established and acknowledged.

Lampkin et al. (1999) define organic farming as "a viable, environmentally and socially sustainable method of agricultural production" using no synthetic chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Reliance on external inputs is extremely reduced while maximum use is made of farm-derived resources and natural products and processes are employed for plant nutrition and pest control. The same principles are applied to livestock breeding and rearing practices where animal welfare is safeguarded. Moreover, organic farming provides consumers with quality products (Columba

1995; Santucci 1997) that are healthy, have natural flavours and fragrances, and contain no harmful residues while contributing to maintain and enhance soil fertility and biodiversity.

Although technical and quality standards are important aspects of organic farming methods, a broader perspective is necessary to grasp yet another fundamental feature. Organic farming is a different approach to agriculture, a holistic management system of agricultural production (FAO 1999). In the organic approach to farming, the agricultural holding is perceived as "a single and complex organism whose multiple component parts (soil minerals, organic matter, micro-organisms, insects, plants, animals and humans) interact in a dynamic and coherent . . . state of equilibrium producing sufficient yields, adequately offsetting input factors and reacting as a whole to external ecological, institutional, and socio-economic stimuli" (Lampkin and Measures 1999; Lampkin and Padel 1994).

Though still a small-sized business, organic production is quickly gathering momentum in many countries' agricultural sector. As of the 1990s, both the demand and supply of organic products have increased continuously and significantly (ITC, 1999). Commissioner Franz Fischler (1998) defines organic farming as "one of the most dynamic phenomena of European agriculture." The scenario is multifarious, promising and continuously evolving; it hosts numerous actors, farmers, food processors, large-scale and retail traders, local authorities, international organizations, and consumers who vote with their cash for natural health and quality (Atkisson 2000).

A variety of factors have contributed to reaching the socio-political and commercial status organic production systems have attained. Specific attention is here paid to three of them, which can help highlight organic practitioners networking skills and the multivalence of the organic message.

First, the persistent and enthusiastic commitment of many pioneer farmers and of their associations has played a key role, after years of working on the fringes of the agricultural world and of operating far from the centres of power and of decision-making, disregarded or even opposed by conventional agriculture (Michelsen 1997). The gradual acceptance of organic farming was not so much related to its message *per sé* as to a more favourable context<sup>6</sup> and to the mode of presentation of organic ideas (Clunies-Ross and Cox 1994). Farmers and their associations have managed to attract the interest of growing numbers of consumers and citizens, thus establishing precious alliances with groups and individuals and developing a market that is still rapidly expanding. Organic spokesmen have gradually abandoned the more purist stances and presented the organic message and its benefits in ways more conscionable for the powerful corporate system of conventional agriculture. By adopting new and more pragmatic lobbying strategies they have embarked upon a professionalized dialogue with traditional agricultural organizations and won the support of many public institutions (Michelsen 1997).

Second, organic farming has always been able to attract scores of individuals and groups from all walks of life. Organic supporters come from all professions and socio-cultural backgrounds, thus ensuring that the ideas and energies underpinning organic farming are now part and parcel of a broad range of activities and interests<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the organic movement is increasingly seen as a very important container of social and environmental diversity and an ideal context for fostering synergy between human and natural energies (Catelli 1999).

Third, organic farming fosters a more intimate and genuine relationship with food of which it retrieves the full sensory and symbolic value<sup>8</sup> (Lang 1996). Organic food becomes, thus, a powerful vector of a number of important socio-economic, ethical, cultural and ecological issues and struggles connected both to the rural and urban spheres and easily ignored in conventional agro-food networks (Goodman 1999). Organic food production and consumption patterns meet the demands of an ever greater number of modern-day citizen-consumers, that are not only interested in eating well and healthily but also in re-establishing a long-lost contact with the countryside and the world of farmers, in contributing to the preservation of the natural values, the typical products and the distinctive features of rural areas.

Policy makers, too, have progressively acknowledged these valuable potentials of organic farming, which are instrumental in solving delicate matters such as environmental protection (Dabbert 1997; Kristensen 1999), preservation of rural values, reorientation of agricultural produce back to the market, the safety and quality of food (Marino 1995). Such issues are strategic for the achievement of sustainable rural development in which the recent EC regulation (EC Reg. 1257/99) has explicitly recognized a role for organic farming, after its successful involvement in various Objective 1, Objective 5b and LEADER projects (Lamkpin et al. 1999).

### **Convergence of organic farming and sustainable rural development**

Van Mansvelt and Mulder (1993) argue that "the potentials of organic types of agriculture make them valuable options for a sustainable agriculture and rural development." This patent connection between organic farming and sustainable rural development has been progressively acknowledged. However, the study of the relationship between the two represents a stimulating branch of research yet to be fully covered by the literature (Marino 1996/b). This is the point from which the endeavour of this paper originated to propose a specifically tailored framework of analysis and interpretation of such an interesting convergence. The central purpose here is to derive new illuminating insights, to foster a better understanding of the role that organic farming can play in rural development processes.

In the advanced framework, drawing on Allason et al.'s co-evolutionary perspective (1994), rural and organic systems are considered as co-evolving networks which can be treated according to the general theoretical approach of the network analysis. The notion of a melding of social, economic, natural, and technical elements and processes, in a continuous evolution both locally and globally, used by Murdoch (1994) to portray rural processes, is, at the same time, an excellent description of what is happening both within the organic movement and around it in rural contexts. In this sense, the modern organic farming world can be conceived as a veritable embodiment of the concept of Murdoch's 'hybrid and composite network' (1994). The reasons for this are the broad range of actors and activities involved in organic farming, the many horizontal and vertical links with other sectors and environments, the important roles played by non-human factors, such as technical aspects and natural elements, the different meanings attributed to organic food, and its production and consumption networks. Therefore, in order to explore the complex urban-rural phenomenon of organic farming and its multidimensional interrelatedness with rural development processes, the 'network' is used as a unifying concept underpinning the relations amongst individuals, organizations, entities and products.

Interestingly, framing organic and rural systems in terms of evolutionary perspective and network analysis approach provides an adequate analytical lens to recognize and focus on some crucial features that characterize modern organic movement and make its contribution to sustainable rural development distinctly important. Specific reference is made here to: organic farming practitioners and institutions' experience and skills in community building, animation and revitalization; the vision, intrinsic to the organic philosophy, of farming systems as social and natural co-evolving constructions; organic systems' embodiment of an alternative, multivalent form of agriculture, weaving new spatial and functional linkages between rural and urban areas and communities.

In the light of these considerations, convergence of organic farming and sustainable rural development can be efficaciously, albeit not comprehensively, described by focusing on four interlinked broad concepts, namely *innovation*, *conservation*, *participation*, and *integration* (Pugliese 1999). Such key ideas, constitute a fourfold grouping of the main aspects of sustainable rural development; at the same time they represent the cornerstones of a four-component framework within which organic farming contribution's to sustainable rural development may be conveniently discussed. Using a culinary metaphor it can be stated that, innovation, conservation, participation and integration are all essential 'ingredients' in the 'recipe' of sustainable rural development: organic farming represents a viable, flexible way to combine these four ingredients, leading to balanced, appreciable results.

In the following paragraphs, the contribution that organic farming can offer to the achievement of sustainable rural development is analyzed in greater detail. Every single 'aspect-ingredient' is discussed in a sub-section in which, firstly, compliance of organic farming with sustainability principles and with the recommendations of current rural policies is outlined. Secondly, specific reference is made to some interesting examples of urban-rural initiatives in the EU contexts in which organic farming is a central, catalyzing element.

In this respect, European 'rural mosaic' (Hoggart, Buller and Black 1995) offers a great variety of experiences to study and to replicate. Thanks to the conspicuous financial and human resources mobilized by recent policy interventions, urbanized and peripheral ruralities are currently experimenting various paths of sustainable rural development, different solutions to local and global rural challenges. Since in an increasing number of initiatives organic farming plays a crucial role, precious lessons can be drawn from such a rich laboratory of ideas.

### *Innovation*

Innovation represents a strategic element for the development of agricultural and rural systems (Marotta 1995). Innovative solutions are no longer chiefly derived from technological progress, as was the case during the modernization of agriculture, but are also the fruit of new methods of organizing and managing processes and information within and between sectors; within territories and between them. Innovation is also identifiable in the reintroduction of elements, spaces, and people into different positions, integrated in renewed relational strategies. At this stage, the multifunctional role attributed to agriculture and to the farmer of the new century comes to mind. Of some interest is also the redefinition of the duty of the institutions



operating in agricultural areas and that of the rural inhabitants, the former increasingly referred to as catalysts (i.e. enablers) rather than executors of development, the latter, encouraged to become key players in their own progress and to resolve at least part of the problems encountered through self-help initiatives and voluntary work.<sup>9</sup>

Direct references to innovation are present in almost all EU interventions. Particularly in the rural field, the Community LEADER initiative supports pilot, innovative, transferable programmes, able to indicate new paths of rural development through the involvement of Local Action Groups. According to the LEADER approach, the innovative dimension of actions must go hand in hand with the availability of local resources, that is, with the geographic, economic and socio-cultural context of the rural area in question, when suggesting new solutions to local specific problems, and in taking advantage of new development opportunities: rural tourism, enhancement and marketing of local agricultural products, environmental and socio-cultural facilities and so on.

Innovation is, first and foremost, a mental attitude, capable of combining creativity with the spirit of initiative and taste for risk (EC 1995). Policy makers see innovation as a positive force of change and revitalization in rural areas. It is, in contemporary circumstances, the only alternative to rural decline and abandonment (Galston and Baehler 1995)<sup>10</sup>, the only way to properly exploit what is currently perceived as the rural comparative advantage: natural amenities, cultural traditions, unstressful rhythms of life, genuine food, unpolluted environment, closer interpersonal relationships, and open air entertainment. Innovation is a 'must' of endogenous development that just depends on the local capability to produce innovative solutions to current rural challenges by combining internal resources and external opportunities (INEA 1999).

Against this backdrop, organic farming can represent an important element of innovation in rural areas. Organic farming is an innovative way of envisioning and practicing agriculture. Its innovative force manifests itself in various aspects. Organic farming is a complex innovation, requiring a high information level and low technological input. It does not affect production techniques exclusively, it rather influences farm management in its entirety (Padel 1994; Padel 2001). Like organic pioneers, modern organic farmers are innovators. A greater openness to change, a lower average age and a higher education level often distinguish them from their conventional colleagues and usually make them more prone to accept external challenges (Padel 1994; Padel 2001). Therefore, organic people can have an important role in animating rural areas. Many marketing channels and initiatives of organic products are innovative. Among these, for example, we find variants of direct sales, which exist alongside, more traditional methods used by the first organic farmers, like sales on the farm premises and local markets (Steele 1995). With the development of the sector and its official acceptance into mainstream agriculture, the access of organic products to "impersonal sales circuits, similar or parallel to those of conventional products" is being favoured (Miele 1996). At the same time, the alternative channels of direct sales have increasing success among those consumers, ever more interested in installing a personal relationship with the farmer, and thus, a more direct link with the food being consumed and with the environment in which it is grown. Significantly, organic food has increasingly established itself as an important multivalent vector of such urban-rural issues.



It is not by chance that in the United Kingdom, the Soil Association (1998) defines these forms of direct sales as local food links and actively sustains their diffusion through the implementation of sustainable growth principles stated in Agenda 21 on the basis of the positive impacts on health, economy, and environment. The Soil Association is currently carrying out development projects for the local economy in some rural areas, in which local food links represent a valuable marshalling element within local communities and, consequently, an effective stimulus for further local connections and development investments; in Feenstra's words (1997), "a logical and appropriate way to revitalize a community." An example of such projects is the business support programme developed by the East Anglia Food Link (1997). The project, which has been funded through EU Objective 5b scheme, aims to promote production, processing, and consumption of organically produced food from the East Anglia Objective 5 region<sup>17</sup>.

On a more general note, direct marketing, like other activities that the organic farmers are often involved in, is the expression of a decisively innovative and stimulating environment-agriculture-territory relationship, capable of drawing urban and rural aspects together, thereby contributing to rural development and utilizing precious rural resources in a sustainable manner (Pugliese 1999).

### *Conservation*

The concept of sustainable rural development conciliates adherence to the market together with rules that safeguard the equilibrium and stability of rural and agricultural systems, thereby proposing itself as a conservative process of change (Iacoponi 1996). Therefore, conservation and innovation are not necessarily opposed elements. Adequate conservative strategies do not necessarily act as an obstacle to change and growth; on the contrary, they can help avoid the erosion of the rural comparative advantage and limit unwanted transformations. Through the conservation of local distinctive features, the development process can sustain itself in the long term, given that it becomes well-rooted in the area in which it takes place, through the use and enhancement of local resources, thereby contributing to identity construction and preservation, as well as to the reproduction of local specificities on which it is based.

According to the position adopted by EU institutions, conservative processes of development must be promoted in rural areas; policies must protect the quality and the amenity of rural landscapes, preserve the natural and cultural diversity of European ruralities, while improving rural well-being and meeting the multiple urban demands on the countryside (Cork Declaration 1996). A particularly interesting aspect, in this sense, is the role designed for organic farming in many protected areas by some European projects (Willer 1998), which overcome the distinctly restricting approach adopted for years and are guided by a principle regarding 'environmental conservation carried out through use.' Therefore with the intention of producing natural and human landscapes that 'live and work,' organic farming has been accepted in several parks and natural reserves as an activity compatible with the conservation of the natural specificity, but also capable of generating income and development, avoiding the mummification of these areas. For instance, in 1998, in the Rhön biosphere reserve (middle Germany) several projects were set up to make

the maintenance of agriculture acceptable to conservationists, attractive for farmers and economically viable, so that it did not have to depend on state subsidies for landscape conservation and management. Among the various initiatives, a special programme for local organic dairies was launched, thus demonstrating that organic farming has a potential for environment conservation and viable agricultural business.

Similarly, in many Italian national and regional parks, organic farming receives specific funding from the Park Authority; collective marketing strategies (e.g. label creation and promotion) are implemented for organically produced typical local products, and various recreational and cultural initiatives are organized around organic food values, local rural traditions, natural beauties (AIAB and Prober 1999). Hence, local productions, amenities, and cultural identity are preserved, while new business options and jobs are created, transforming protected areas in true 'working landscapes.' The potential of this development model proves to be equally promising in other unprotected rural areas. The environmental field is certainly the area in which the conservative feature of organic farming is most highlighted. Evidence shows "that many organic farming systems have lower impacts on the environment than comparable conventional systems" (Kristensen 1999).

With the aim of minimizing environmental impacts (IFOAM 1998), organic farming refers back to the habits and traditions of our farming forefathers, deriving information from their wisdom and profound knowledge of the agri-systems and their mechanisms. Thus, apart from the valuable natural resources, organic methods may contribute to conserve and revive 'local styles of farming' (van der Ploeg 1994), conveying modern, innovative meaning and purpose to the tradition which produced the agricultural landscapes that both rural and urban communities so admire today and do not want to disappear. They recover and improve past agricultural customs, contributing to the handing down of local traditions, renewing them and adapting them to current demands, and thus transforming them into revitalization and development instruments.

### *Participation*

Local players' involvement and participation in the growth process is a key factor in the endogenous development paradigm, which is primarily a people-centred development model. According to the model, far from being simply the target group, and sometimes the victims of externally induced development action, local people must become the protagonists of the development work carried out in the area where they live and work. Therefore, they should be helped to identify their needs and viable solutions. At the same time, they should be encouraged and enabled to contribute to the planning and implementation of the development process. To this purpose individual and collective empowerment strategies should be adopted and a new role designed for national and local institutions, which are called to use public resources to catalyze action in the private sector and in local communities. In this respect, some critical points have to be considered: the diffusion of a pro-growth attitude, the building of a well-organized partnership of local leaders and actors, the emergence of private and local authorities' entrepreneurship, the stimulation of indigenous talents, the awakening of local solidarity, and the mobilization of voluntary efforts (Galston and Baehler 1995).

The relevance of 'interactive participation' in rural development is clearly stated by the European Conference on Rural Development, which announces that: "the emphasis must be on participation and a bottom-up approach, which harnesses the creativity and solidarity of rural communities . . . Rural development must be local and community-driven" (Cork declaration 1996).

The participatory approach, which implies awareness of self-potential and dynamism, is an innovative key element of current rural policies, designed to react to rural stagnation and marginalization, to benefit from multiple urban-rural interconnections and to keep under control the globalizing trends progressively affecting rural territories. For rural actors and communities, the participatory attitude is a crucial pre-requisite to internalize (and localize) chances of growth provided by technology, the market, and policies. It is the only way to become leading figures, conscious of their own development in what can be defined the 'co-evolution' (Polidori and Romano 1996) of the local context together with external trends.

Hard work, autonomous efforts and integrated, collective initiatives are required for a successful organic management of ecosystems and farm enterprises. As a consequence, organic farming indirectly teaches people to have a more conscious connection with nature and society resulting in a pro-active attitude and a participatory approach in the growth of their own business and community. Organic farming requires a high level of commitment, both at the cultivation stage, because it cannot resort to the easy chemical solutions available, and at the commercialization stage of the products, which need adequate promotion and marketing. Increased technical and entrepreneurial skills are thus necessary in organic farming to result in an economically viable venture, considering the fact that we are dealing with an emerging sector and market. These circumstances make well-organized and careful farm management essential and obtainable only through constant and hard work, which concomitantly induces awareness of self-potential and of internal and external difficulties.

For many farmers, going organic means regaining possession and pride of one's role as a producer, that is, as an expert of the land, its mechanisms and its products (Tovey 1997; IAMB 1999). In order to live and work in harmony with the surrounding nature, as the organic philosophy envisages, farmers must know and respect the relations between ecosystems, use them wisely for their production purposes, while actively taking part in their preservation and enhancement. Organic farmers, therefore, no longer consider themselves only passive beneficiaries of Community support, nor simple executors of instructions of pesticide and fertilizer producers, but rather as rural experts, stewards of invaluable knowledge and experience.

In this respect, the distinctive relationship that organic farmers establish with technical advisors is of some interest. It does not entail the unilateral teaching-learning relations imposed by modernization, on the contrary it requires a strong co-operation and the integration of farmers' practical experience with experts' scientific knowledge to study ecosystem mechanisms on the land and plan a rational use for it (Schiatti and Tellarini 1996). Moreover, everyday difficulties allow organic farmers to understand the relevance of integrated and collective action to guarantee an environmentally sound agriculture and viable organic business. They perceive that individual efforts are essential but not enough. Thus, in order to rapidly and efficiently solve the technical and legislative difficulties encountered in the application of organic method, as well as in product selling, farmers and other organic

operators are induced to adopt pro-active and participatory attitudes and behaviours and are encouraged to become involved in collective initiatives.

Such circumstances suggest that an interesting correlation exists between the adoption of organic practices and the development of networking activities among converted farmers who share interests and worries and cannot make use of conventional agriculture networks. Compared to the latter, organic networks appear more intricate (Marino 1996/a) and are based on commercial relations, requests for information and technical support and participation in development and socio-cultural initiatives (Lampkin et al. 1999). Therefore, Marino (1996/b) asserts, organic agriculture seems to have a valuable ability to activate people, favouring the participation of those adopting it and creating the conditions for increased commitment and involvement. This occurs to the farmers and to the consumers of organic products; the latter, in many cases, support this type of farming, not exclusively through careful and conscious purchasing, but also through direct participation in numerous projects associated with the diffusion of organics. In short, it can be argued that rural development needs animators, leading actors and catalyzing figures that organics can undoubtedly help to generate and mould. As a matter of fact, people affiliated to the organic farming movement often have important roles in various rural development initiatives (Lampkin et al. 1999).

### *Integration*

The new Common European Agricultural and Rural Policy that is emerging, inspired by the Agenda 2000 (EC 1997) and the Cork declaration, adopts a programmatic strategy based on the logic of 'integrated rural development.' This recognizes that agriculture is but one in a bundle of factors affecting rural development. Thus, agricultural and rural policies must necessarily be included in global programmes contributing to the growth of the local system as a whole (Buckwell and Sotte 1997). "Rural development policy must be multidisciplinary in concept, and multi-sectoral in application, with a clear territorial dimension" (Cork declaration 1996).

Since EU strategies for rural areas are based on a flexible and endogenous model (Iacoponi 1996) and assign a central and pivotal role to farming and related activities, a careful diversification of rural economies and a reorganization of the agricultural sector are highly important in furnishing a vital and dynamic impulse within the local system. From this perspective, depending on the endogenous potential, the development of a whole area may opt for agribusiness, agri-tourism, agri-environmental, agri-craftsmanship or agri-industrial sectors, or move concomitantly in several directions that can be integrated with and strengthen one another (Marotta 1995).

In this context, organic farming provides interesting opportunities and an intrinsic ability of integration with the territory and with other sectors of the economy. From a strictly agricultural point of view, organic farming represents a strong reorganization stimulus for farms and intensification stimulus for the production processes (in an eco-compatible sense), thus opposing the gradual re-structuring of farms and the simplification of crops favoured by previous European policies (San-tucci 1996). Moreover, in the organic sector there exists, an interesting specific drive to local vertical integration, apart from the obvious benefits in terms of economy of scale. The value of the hard work and commitment required to obtain genu-

ine, tasty and environment-friendly organic productions need to be guaranteed and maintained in the further phases of the chain. This is possible only through consistent processing activities able to preserve and enhance, in processed products, the biological and ethical quality of original organic raw materials; coherent promotion and marketing strategies that are specifically planned to obtain satisfactory market results as well as to transfer the organic message to consumers and to promote the rural territory of origin, its people, its traditions. Organically produced food is very often also 'typical' of the area it comes from. A successful example of local vertical integration in the organic sector is represented by the Alce Nero agricultural co-operative which received funding through the LEADER initiative to develop an integrated system of production, processing and marketing of organic cereals in the Marche region (central Italy)<sup>12</sup>.

In relation to the integration with the other components of the local socio-economic systems, organic farming holds the advantage of already operating according to a holistic approach and is capable of transferring it from crop and pest management to other areas of activity in which the modern organic enterprise is often involved: tourism, catering, environmental and food education, enhancement of local products etc. In addition, organics is an emerging sector, progressively organizing and structuring itself. Such a condition almost automatically encourages the creation of synergies with other sectors for promotional and development purposes. Integration with the surrounding area and other activities is in many ways a spontaneous strategy for the organic movement, fostered by the dynamism of its people and the systems-based approach that distinguishes it. The vast number and variety of projects and initiatives that orbit around the diffusion of organics are proof of this. In this respect, it is worthwhile to mention the 'Organic farming and rural Ecodevelopment' project funded, in Sardegna (Italy), through the LEADER II programme. The strong co-operation between the local organic community and other individual and collective actors with different, though converging, interests and competences is an important distinctive feature of the project which represents a successful, replicable model of integrated rural development built around the diffusion of organic farming<sup>13</sup>.

## Conclusions

The spreading of organic farming methods and initiatives of sustainable rural development are both crucial processes underway in many agricultural areas. They often occur in the same areas and involve the same actors, inevitably weaving interesting bonds, which, so far, have not been extensively investigated. This paper argues that a composite and promising relationship links organic farming to sustainable rural development. On such a basis an exploratory search for multiple connections and synergies between the two has been carried out. Drawing on the evolutionary perspective and the network analysis approach adopted by some modern rural sociologists, organic systems are conceptualized as 'hybrid and composite networks,' sharing many points of communality with sustainability-oriented rural systems. Their multifaceted convergence is described within an originally formulated framework, which consists of four cornerstones corresponding to four basic aspects of sustainable rural development, i.e. innovation, conservation, participation, and integration. It is

suggested that organic farming systems can effectively contribute to all these aspects, thanks to their dynamism, multivalence, and networking activities. Such crucial features clearly emerge in various development projects in which organic farming is involved and make it a viable, interesting option for sustainable rural development.

The analysis proposed is intended to be indicative rather than exhaustive. It is advanced as a starting point, which will, hopefully, inspire new illuminating research work. A next interesting step could be the identification of appropriate network descriptors. The use of relevant indicators would increase our understanding of organic farming's contribution to sustainable rural development. It would also enable decision-makers and development workers to plan and implement new initiatives in order to optimize synergies existing between organic farming's potentials and rural communities and territories' needs.

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### Notes

1. Allason et al. (1994); Lowe, Murdoch and Ward (1995); Murdoch (1994).
2. World Conservation Strategy (IUCN, UNEP and WWF 1980); World Commission on Economic Development (1987); Pearce, Markandya, Barbier (1989); Pearce and Turner (1990), Ekins and Max-Neef (1992).
3. Resource-conserving forms of agriculture are, for instance, low-external input agriculture, integrated crop and pest management systems, organic farming, biodynamic agriculture and permaculture.
4. The notion and the treatment of networks to conceptualize and explore social, political, and economic issues are based on a substantial literature. Its reviewing, however, goes beyond the scope of the present paper in which the network analysis approach is referred to as a general theoretical framework for the ideas and issues discussed. However, it may be interesting to stress that the type of network analysis being proposed by Murdoch (1994) appears to be far closer to the post-war tradition of British social anthropology (the Manchester school), rather than to Harvard (USA) structuralist approach. The former paid specific attention to individuals' decisional autonomy and manipulation skills for personal aims as well as to cultural and historical dimensions, and observed social changes and conflicts according to a situational perspective; the latter maintained the total dependence of individuals on the structure of networks, of which it specifically developed the formal aspects by adopting rigorous mathematical-statistical techniques of analysis (Amaturo 1997).
5. The IFOAM Standards, EC Reg. 2092/91, the Guidelines from the Codex Alimentarius Commission (FAO-WHO), EC Reg. 331/2000, just to make some examples.
6. With the downfall of agricultural productivism and the rising awareness of its anomalies and distortions, the organic farming movement has been able to make the multiple advantages engendered by the more widespread use of its practices known and appreciated. This has also been occasioned by the growing concerns over environmental and health issues characterizing the end of the millennium and by the nostalgia and interest surrounding the fate of rural areas and populations.
7. Environmental protection, health, education, tourism, local products marketing, social solidarity and bioarchitecture are just some of the various domains in which organic people operate. A trip down the lively and colourful aisles of one of the organic farming fairs

would convince even the most skeptical observer that organic food is rapidly emerging from its niche market. Indeed, organic food is no longer the *élite* luxury of a handful of health fanatics; it has by now developed synergy with a number of other sectors of the market for 'natural' and 'country' products, and is the focus of stimulating cultural and commercial trends (Pugliese 1999).

8. In this respect, Beardsworth and Keil (in Tovey 1997) argue that organic food is not only 'good to eat' but also 'good to think.'
9. Innovation in attitudes and initiatives is often associated with local communities' empowerment, which represents a strategic feature in the local development spiral (Galston and Baehler 1995). From this perspective, for instance 'Help rural communities to help themselves' is one of the guidelines explicitly adopted by the British government in its programme for rural areas (DoE, Rural White Paper 1995).
10. Referring to rural development in the United States, the authors argue that: "Rural America has entered a new era in which innovation may not guarantee success, but status quo policies will ensure failure. The challenge in the years ahead is to shape new strategies responsive to both rural realities and changing national and global circumstances" (Galston and Baehler 1995).
11. The success of the project is largely dependent on the involvement of local community resources. In this light, co-operation with all existing projects and organizations with a potential interest in the initiative is encouraged in order to maximize the positive effects of the programme. Therefore, the establishment of effective linkages between local actors – individuals, businesses, community organizations, local authorities and statutory agencies – clearly represents the core part of the programme which is meant to create a stimulating framework and to act as a catalyst for the development of dynamic networks contributing to business expansion and social cohesion. The networking activity is to be extended beyond the project area to neighbouring parishes in the Rural Development Area as well as beyond the region, encouraging contacts with other EU regions and international partners (Farmer's Link 1997).
12. In addition, after signing some important marketing agreements the co-operative has gained access to various national and international distribution channels and 'Alce Nero' has become a popular brand of a broad range of organic products, including products from other undertakings. At the same time new techniques in grinding grain and making pasta have been experimented. The co-operative has also played a significant role in the promotion of organic methods and messages, at the local and national level. A publishing house has been set up to this purpose. Alce Nero is involved in agri-tourism activities attracting, among others, many students and researchers. As a result, many new jobs have been created and many rural people have been kept on the land offering them a viable, non-polluting chance of development (LEADER database).
13. The project has been promoted and carried out by the Consorzio Ecosviluppo Sardegna, including the regional organic association (ARPA-AIAB Sardegna), the biobuilding association (Associazione Bioedilizia), several agri-tourist farms and various other agricultural, social and cultural co-operatives. Organic values, people, and practices play a pivotal part in the three main project areas: I) the development of the local agro-food sector through the setting up of local processing plants for organic productions, the creation of a network of specialized retailers; also selling fair trade products and offering cultural services; and the launch of an organic collective label supported by efficient logistical structures and services and ad-hoc marketing promotion; ii) the development of rural tourism through the expansion of the existing network of organic agri-tourisms, the enlargement of recreational, educational and cultural services (based on the promotion of local gastronomy, craftsmanship and natural amenities), and the adoption of innovative technologies for customer management (Internet); iii) initiatives of rural animation through the organization of meetings and workshops between farmers, business operators, local authorities and organizations.



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Patrizia Pugliese  
Centre International d’Hautes Etudes Méditerranéennes/  
Istituto Agronomico Mediterraneo di Bari  
Bari, Italy