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Local traditional agrifood products as activators of community-led processes of sustainable territorial development in marginal rural areas.

Although increasingly afflicted by structural problems that question their survival, marginal rural areas are often true agrobiodiversity reserves, where origin products (Vandecandelaere et al., 2009), linked with local resources and deeply rooted in traditional production processes and gastronomic culture, still survive to the industrialisation and globalisation of agrifood systems. Indeed, in an era that questions the sustainability of industrial development models, villages and territories in marginal rural areas can represent privileged places to promote innovative territorially-embedded and endogenous development models.

The REACT project¹ deals with the topic of regeneration of marginal rural areas and specifically of the Casentino region (Tuscany, Italy) through the recovery and valorisation of cultural landscape and its different components (material, immaterial and biocultural heritage), adopting a multidisciplinary perspective with the aim to define strategies and actions to activate sustainable, placed-based and people-centred development processes.

In this framework, our work focused on local traditional agrifood products and their contribution to the activation of community-led territorial sustainable development processes. Traditional agrifood products (PAT²) are defined by the Italian law as products “obtained with processing methods, storage and maturation consolidated over time, homogeneous throughout the territory concerned, according to traditional rules, for a period not less than twenty-five years” (D.L. n. 173, 1998; D.M. n. 350, 1999³), and are included in a list set by the Italian Ministry of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forestry in collaboration with the Italian Regions, counting nowadays more than five thousand products.

We present a case study of a community-led regeneration process activated around a PAT: the *Tortello alla Lastra*, potato filled flatbreads cooked on a slate roof tile (“*lastra*”) heated over a fire, typical of the small Apennine Mountain village of Corezzo, where the *Vallesanta* community

¹ REACT - *Regenerating cultural landscapes of inner areas in a people-centred perspective. Historical villages and rural areas of the Casentino region as an ideas incubator of creativity and innovation.* CUP B55F21007810001. (www.react-casentino.unifi.it).

² In Italian, Prodotti Agroalimentari Tradizionali (PAT).

³ [Decreto Legislativo 30 aprile 1998, n. 173, art. 8](#); [Decreto Ministeriale 8 settembre 1999, n. 350](#).

cooperative (Mori, 2014) has been recovering this traditional product, starting to produce and distribute it locally, in restaurant, food shops, small supermarkets and food fairs.

We carried out in-person interviews with some relevant actors involved in the case study, to investigate the structure of this local supply chain, the territorial links of this product, the collective qualification and valorisation strategies around it, the use of collective labelling and short food supply chains as key marketing tools, and their contribution to the revitalisation of the Corezzo village and community.

Results were systematised into a SWOT matrix, discussed internally within the project interdisciplinary research group, and validated externally through a focus group with local actors. Results highlighted some key success factors fostering the valorisation of traditional agrifood products which can be extended more widely to origin products, such as products' local reputation, actors' coordination and collective initiatives, supportive local policymakers, ability to connect with other economic sectors (e.g., tourism), territorial dynamizers (Belletti et al., 2022) able to activate local capital (social and physical) and resources.

Moreover, results showed how the community-led valorisation initiatives around the *Tortello* contributed to invert some negative structural trends in the village, generating new employment, attracting new resident inhabitants, and generating touristic flows. In this respect, the role of the *Vallesanta* cooperative in feeding and combining activism and entrepreneurship in the local community has been fundamental, and the combination of these two elements has contributed to overcoming some of the structural barriers that usually compromise the viability of economic initiatives in such marginal contexts.

Some critical factors hindering such processes emerged too, such as competition from the industrial agrifood sector, lack of generational change in agriculture, lack of technical and financial capacities of producers to sustain collective initiatives.

Increasing the understanding of the contribution of origin products in the activation of territorial sustainable development processes can provide important policy suggestions to address structural weaknesses and promote territorial community regeneration in Casentino and in other marginal rural areas.

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- Agriculture
- Biodiversity **X**
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- Sustainability **X**
- Innovation
- Politics
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