REA | ITALIAN REVIEW OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS

Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/rea

Keynote article

Dear old (and misunderstood) districts, let's look ahead

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Abstract. Food districts seem to be a phenomenon as widespread as they are somewhat little known and misunderstood. After thirty years of collective thinking and practice, we question what districts in the agricultural and rural domain actually are and whether we are yet to produce a scientifically consistent conceptual framework to fully understand them. This article aims to relaunch a debate about this theme, encouraging scholars to refocus their research on it, thereby hopefully prompting policymakers to revisit and review current policy. How the current conceptual framework develops from Becattini's interpretation of the Marshallian Industrial District and its impact on policy design and implementation are analysed and grey areas highlighted. Current transitions linked to sustainability and global challenges are explored through the relevant literature, highlighting the changing meaning of some key concepts that are necessary to reframe the district notion. Our conclusion is that a new generation of district is needed, in addiction to a new policy framework, which in turn will require a reframing and more robust conceptualization of what food districts are. We end by analysing some difficulties and caveats to begin to produce a theoretical definition of a new conceptual framework.

Keywords: food districts, sustainable development, rural development policy, food systems, digital, ecological transitions.
JEL codes: Q18, Q28, 013.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Since the very concept of district in the agricultural and rural domain seems to blur in its implementation, the gap between science and politics should be bridged.
- Food districts need a clearer legal framework, consistent with the conceptual one.
- Broader platforms for discussion and debate involving the general public, not just the agricultural and rural actors, are needed in order to establish how to move forward.

OPEN ACCESS

Citation: Toccaceli, D., Pacciani, A. (2023). Dear old (and misunderstood) districts, let's look ahead. *Italian Review of Agricultural Economics* 78(3): 3-15. DOI: 10.36253/rea-15062

Received: January 15, 2024

Revised: January 15, 2024

Accepted: January 17, 2024

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Corresponding Editor: Marcello De Rosa

1. SOMEWHAT UNKNOWN AND MISUNDERSTOOD

1.1. Introduction

The increasing number of food districts that entered the National Register established by the MASAF[1] reveals a phenomenon as widespread as it is somewhat little known and misunderstood, due to the lack of information sources and relevant research[2]. So far, the only research conducted on behalf of the NRN on a national scale dates back more than a decade (Toccaceli, 2012). The Register led not only to the definition of a growing variety of adjectives qualifying districts, but it provided for other phenomena associated to districts (La Sala *et al*., 2023), so that the very concept of district in the agricultural and rural domain seems to blur and some confusion reigns.

Several questions are arising. After thirty years of research and practice, what actually are districts in the agricultural and rural domain? Do they fit with a consistent conceptual framework? Are they able to reach territorial goals? If and how can they align to the current transitions and withstand the shocks and challenges we all face?

Our thesis is that there is no clearly and completely defined conceptual framework. As a result, we are of the opinion that clear elements are still missing to distinguish a district phenomenon in the agricultural and rural context from other types of organizational phenomena or governance arrangements. Yet, in this keynote article, our purpose is not to reframe the concept, rather we try to demonstrate why that reframing is needed by retracing the evolution of economic thought and regulatory construction and finally considering the old districts in the context of the emerging challenges.

We firstly approach this reflection from a conceptual point of view. The unique concept we can take into account is the Marshallian Industrial District (hereafter MID) as defined by Becattini (Becattini, 1989, 1991, 2000a, 2004; Becattini *et al*., 2009). In this section (paragraph 1.2, 1.3); we highlight the original idea, retrace how this concept has been used in the early attempt of application to the agricultural and rural field. In the second section, we retrace how that has affected the policy design and implementation and *vice versa*, and some consequent misleading interpretation. A new conceptual framework should allow to recognise districts able to face the great effort for sustainability. Therefore, in the third section, we face the "old" districts to the new global challenges to highlight how this can affect the reframing effort. The fourth section provides a short analysis of the caveats and difficulties in defining a new conceptual framework and adds some policy considerations.

Our purpose is to find some stimuli for relaunching a debate about this theme, encouraging scholars and, hopefully, prompting the political sphere to a renovated policy approach.

1.2. From Becattini to a dichotomous, branched concept

In Becattini's words, the MID is defined "*a socio-territorial entity, characterised by the active presence – in a circumscribed, naturally and historically determined, territorial area – of a community of people and a population of industrial firms. In the district […] the community and the firms tend to interconnect*" (Becattini, 2000a, p. 58). Becattini has expanded the original idea of MID – that used also non-production-related arguments, the Marshallian *industrial atmosphere* – to explain how in a geographically-defined area externalities were possible and allowed to generate increasing returns, so as to unfold why better performances are reached in one place rather than in another. MID is an unitarian concept based on an elementary combination of different components: the communitarian one (also defined social or human or cognitive, according to different profile of analysis), the industrial (or productive), the geographical (specificity of the place where it happens) and relational one. Dei Ottati (1995) clarified how the *communitarian market,* acting as the mechanism of governance of transactions, moves down opportunism, uncertainty and ambiguity, so that transaction costs drop.

The concept has been used by Italian scholars to try a translation from the industrial to the agricultural and rural field. Toccaceli (2015) presented an analysis of the difficulties the scholars tried to solve. As an additional example, we can bring to mind the attempt of Amodio *et al.* (2005) to classify a number of types that gradually approach that of the district.

This debate, which flourished in the 1990s and 2000s, was aimed to answer the crucial question of clearly defining the conceptual framework of districts in agriculture. The riddle was only partially solved, due to the difficulties of the adaptation exercise that were

[1] MASAF - Registro nazionale dei Distretti del Cibo (politicheagricole.it).
[2] The availability of information coming from MASAF and Regions and the Autonomous Provinces (which have competence in the matter) is scarce. A number of studies have been developed over a period of twenty-five years, mostly with a case-by-case or regional approach. Georgofili Academy, by means of its Centre for Economic Studies on the Economic Organization of Agriculture and Rural Development GAIA, have newly opened a debate organising the seminar on "Food Districts for the sustainability of territories and supply chains" and promoting a national Observatory on food districts which hosted the first Forum of the food districts CREA is starting to pay new attention to the district phenomenon (Henke *et al*., 2023; La Sala *et al*., 2023; Tarangioli, 2023).

threefold. First, there were different starting points for the speculation. On the one hand there was the need to explain the success of industrial SME's systems, on the other there was the purpose to recognize if, where, when, under which conditions a phenomenon occurred to which MID applied. The second difficulty was derived from the complexity of agricultural production systems in the rural context, which gave rise to a number of specifications that coincided with generating a branched and somewhat unclear concept. Thirdly, and the most relevant in our reasoning, Becattini's notion has been used in a dichotomous way, separating the organizational productive component – which has been used mostly for recognising agricultural district, supply-chain districts and agro-industrial districts (Iacoponi, 1990) – from the socio-communitarian one – mostly used to shape a definition of rural districts (Cecchi, 1992; Iacoponi, 2002) – finally identifying four inhomogeneous types of districts in the agricultural and rural domain[3].

Becattini, (2000b, pp. 266–268) whilst thinking of it as *"coquetry"*, expressed comprehension of the deep reasons that moved his contemporary agrarian economists to the *district hunt*. He retrieved in Bandini some roots of an *ante litteram* district phenomenon – taking into account the peculiar structural characteristics of agriculture. Following Musotti (2004, p. 152), Bandini's analysis of agricultural systems, going beyond the agricultural zones defined by Serpieri, appears coherent with the foundations of the theory of local development described by Becattini (2000b). The ability to represent agriculture as a set of agricultural systems, each having its own characterizations, pushes Bandini's analysis to claim "*the need for an agricultural policy divided into zones and the fact that the shift of the relevant competences from the national level to the regional one does not in itself appear to guarantee an approach to the specific needs of operators*" (Musotti, 2004, p. 155).

Becattini also clearly expressed an articulated criticism towards "*district hunting*", pointing out the reasons for non-comparability of two such different phenomena. Trying to provide an answer, De Rosa and Turri (2004, pp. 411-412) highlighted the need to achieve a unitarian theoretical approach, as there was "*the risk of arriving at a plethora of undifferentiated local systems that cannot always be traced back to the district logic*".

On this basis, we can sustain that a clearer conceptual framework must be attempted and that we need to identify a strong theoretical background.

1.3. … and to a flattened concept

Choosing a political approach, i.e. considering the rural district as an instrument to put in place the emerging idea of rural-territorial development, Pacciani developed a different notion of rural district and really put it in place in the prototypal case of the Maremma rural district[4] – hereafter MRD, see Appendix Box 1 – (Pacciani, 1997, 2002, 2003; Pacciani, Toccaceli, 2010; Belletti, Marescotti, 2010). This rural district notion had its roots in the CAP debate on the Agenda 2000 reform underway in the mid-1990s. Only a few years after the Mac Sharry reform, the main threads of that debate – on which the notion of rural district was then grounded – derived from the emerging of both environmental issues and the need for a territorial integrated approach to rural development (Buckwell, 1997; Buckwell, Sotte, 1997; European Commission, 1997). The first issues focused on the multifunctionality of agriculture and its ability to provide public goods with the support of public policy due to market failures. The latter aimed to design a "wider rural policy" (Copus, van Well, 2015) that, as stated in the Cork declaration (European Commission, 1996), aimed to implement a sustainable, endogenous, integrated, rural development policy, in which "*farmers as land/landscape managers, custodians of the rural environment, biodiversity, traditional social structures and culture […] are also seen as 'a platform for economic diversification'*" (Cooper *et al*., 2009 quoted in Copus, van Well, 2015, p. 56).

The MRD purposely targets cohesion aims together with an agricultural objective. Yet, also this cohesive and rural approach did not result in a clear conceptualisation. Albeit a concept of "rural cohesion policy" (Copus, van Well, 2015) was fashionable then, remaining for some years afterwards, it was never codified in the rules until it finally downed when rural development policy was definitively attributed to the Agricultural Commissioner (Sotte, 2023, p. 100, 122, 132). Because of its political rooting, the rural district based on a territorial approach has been flattened into developing a rural policy informed on a rigorous sectoral approach (Copus, van Well, 2015).

Once "flattened", the rural district notion could not answer to the different instances coming from the great variety of rural areas in terms of human-geographic type, the territorial scale at which an identity community can recognise itself, the economic scale, which can range in relation to the different geographic/spatial conditions,

[3] For a more complete literature review on this point see (Toccaceli, 2015, p. 6-9). For a critical review of the theoretical background see (De Rosa, Turri, 2004).

[4] In the role of minister for rural development of the province of Grosseto (1995-2004). In those years, on behalf of the Region, Tuscan Provinces were in charge of governmental power in matters of agriculture.

types of products, supply-chain and agri-business systems. Those gaps directly affected the shaping of national and regional rules on agricultural districts and their implementation, as analysed in the following section.

Summarizing what has so far been analysed, we confirm the need: i) to overcome a dichotomous and branched concept and take together the organizational, productive components with the intangible, social, relational, cognitive ones; ii) to achieve a unitarian theoretical approach grounding on the huge literature on the cognitive approach to local development (De Rosa, Turri, 2004), but iii) abandoning the idea of a sectoral translation of the district concept from industry to agriculture, as it has been demonstrated to be unfruitful; iv) to achieve a conceptual framework allowing us to respond to the need for "an agricultural policy divided into zones" (Musotti, 2004) and v) allowing the district phenomena to be systematically analysed and assessed.

2. DEAR (AND NOT DEAR) DISTRICTS IN POLICY AND POLITICS APPROACH

2.1. The flattened, cluttered concept established by law

National laws on agricultural districts were established and then renewed in two different historic moments.

The Orientation law n. 57/2001 aimed to favour organizational innovation in Italian agriculture to make the farm response to the Agenda 2000 policy more effective. In article 7 c.3, the law entrusted the Government with the task of defining the legislative decrees, consistent with the agricultural policy of the European Union, aimed, among other things, at supporting, also through the concertation method[5], economic and social development of agriculture, aquaculture, fishing and agri-food systems according to the productive vocations of the territory, identifying the prerequisites for the establishment of quality agri-food, rural and fisheries districts and ensuring the protection of natural resources, biodiversity, cultural heritage and the agricultural and forestry landscape.

In the legislative decree n. 228/2001 article 13, districts were then defined in two different manners. Rural districts were defined as "*local production systems*[6] *characterised by homogeneous identity from a historical and territorial point of view, arising from integration between agricultural activities and other local activities, as well as the production of goods or services of particular specificity, consistent with traditions and natural and territorial vocations.*"

Quality agrifood districts were defined as "*local production systems, even interregional, characterised by significant economic presence and production interrelationship, and by interdependence of farms and agri-food enterprises, and by one or more certified or protected products in compliance with applicable Community or national regulations, or by traditional or typical products*".

The different relevance of the territorial contiguity leads us to think with Musotti (2001) that two ways were identified to recognise districts: the territory for the rural districts and the certified quality product for the quality agrifood districts. As these distinctions are extremely simplifying the reality, we consider with Musotti (2001) that this law would scarcely help in identifying the actual district situations, but nevertheless the conceptual dichotomy was established by law.

Furthermore, the definition of the preconditions was shaped on the model of the legal definition of the industrial district. No other indications were added about their constitution and functioning, nor were specific aims assigned. By law, the competences in the matter were (and still are) in charge of the Regions and Autonomous Provinces that over time have established their own laws. This has generated a multiplying factor of both types and politic interpretations of this policy tool, far beyond the simple early duplication. Hence, the early branched character of the concept has been (and still is) further multiplied[7] by regional laws.

Law n. 205/2017, art.1 p.499 modified the previous art.13, to rule the growing types of existent districts as collected and analysed in Toccaceli (2012), established Food Districts (FDs), adding new to the previous definitions. The renewal of the law drew from the emerging new targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[8] (United Nations General Assembly, 2015), that had been well focused during the Milan Expo 2015 "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life". First of all, the new law introduced a set of aims to which the FDs are committed. Also the adjective that renews the district

[5] Concertation is a policy orchestration among politicians, local institutions and social parties to implement at local scale public programmes finalised at increasing employment in the weakest areas of Italy. This political approach was largely experienced at the end of the 1990s

[6] Local production systems are the homogeneous productive contexts characterised by both a high concentration of industrial enterprises and the specialisation of business systems.

[7] On the work of Regions and analysis of the complete set of legal definitions Toccaceli (2012) rests to date the only research available.

[8] 2030 Agenda was adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 and provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership.

qualification resonates with the central idea that food takes in the 2030 Agenda perspective. The FDs have been established "*in order to promote territorial development, cohesion and social inclusion, encourage the integration of activities characterized by territorial proximity, guarantee food safety, reduce the environmental impact of production, reduce food waste and safeguard the territory and the rural landscape through agricultural and agri-food activities*".

Territorial development, cohesion and social inclusion are placed first, echoing the early meaning of the MRD. However, the new law in force does not provide either a new definition of what an FD is, or something about its characteristics, nor a more comprehensive definition aiming at collecting the multiplication of too many types that arose over time. Rather, in respect to the regional laws in force and taken note of the plethora of existing ones, FDs pragmatically collect together any types of district already recognised by the Regions also adding: bio-districts; organic districts; the local production systems characterized by the interrelationship and integration between agricultural activities, in particular that of direct sales of agricultural products, and the proximity marketing and catering activities carried out in the same territory, of solidarity economy networks and purchasing groups supportive.

More interesting news is the provision of a common financial framework to support district projects through a national tool managed by the MASAF, the District Contract-Agreement, mostly shaped on the pre-existent and well proven Contract of Supply Chain[9]. Tuscany Region has introduced the Integrated Project of District – shaped on the model of the Integrated Project of Supply Chain – framed around the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. These contracts support material and immaterial investments of farms and agro-industrial firms, thus aligning agricultural and rural districts in the more traditional set of sectoral policy tools.

Furthermore, the concept of governance shaped by the regional rules – and used by the majority – is derived from the one of the laws on industrial districts, which in turn came from the process of concertation[10] largely experienced in the 1990s. In the light of current approaches and scholars' thinking, it is an "archaic" form of governance[11] that shows its limitations, as argued in the following section.

[9] Already established in 2003, only after the law of 2017 the contract of district has been financed. For more detailed info and analysis see Toccaceli (2012).

[10] See footnote n. 5.

[11] Sometimes organized in overarching lobbying structure to manage the relationships with MASAF.

2.2. And reinforced by politics interpretations

During the last thirty years, opposed political approaches have governed and managed this topic both at national and regional level, shaping the concept in (too many) different ways, so that successive interpretations and misinterpretations have left their mark on the history that developed[12].

The incipit was in a progressive political context. It was opened to new relationship between private and public actors and to new forms of governance for managing public funds committed to local employment and development, especially by means of negotiated programming. On this mood, industrial districts were formed earlier and then rural and quality agri-food districts, whose central ideas are public-private governance and local development.

2006 was a year of discontinuity, when the neo-liberal vision was affirmed, radically changing the meaning of district by substituting the concept of local productive system with the one of productive district intended as a free aggregation of enterprises of any sectors. Losing the public-private partnership for district governance, the – albeit feeble – link to local development blurred and the productive and sectoral aims prevailed.

Put in place according to this political approach, the dichotomous concept was confirmed. Referring to the new national rules, some Regions have legislated and recognised several productive districts. Therefore, the multiplicity of types embraces such a wide variety that the phenomenon goes well beyond those related to the expected diversity of territorial, social and productive conditions of the places. And it goes also far beyond any scientific conceptualisation.

Over time, opposing political parties have incorporated the term district inside their own political vision, although assigning different meanings. Consequently, as an object of policy intervention, districts have had ups and downs, and according to the waves they have been both appreciated and not.

3. OLD DISTRICTS FOR NEW CHALLENGES?

3.1. Changed context, changed concepts

In 2001 rural and quality agrifood districts were facing modernization of agriculture and in 2017 food districts were to deal with the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development goals. Anyway, as argued above, new aims have been attached to food districts without verifying

[12] For a reconstructive review see Toccaceli (2012, p.21-35).

if the conceptual framework – already shaky – would be consistent with them. In this section, we try to contribute to this reflection by focusing on the main topics – without the ambition of being exhaustive – with the aim of highlighting how they could affect the development of a new conceptual framework. Given the scientific framework of the topics in broad terms, we especially pay attention to the scale of the phenomena, wondering whether places still matter in the face of the global dimension of the challenges. Besides, through a brief and not exhaustive review, we reflect on the changing meaning of some basic concepts that one might use to reframe the new district notion.

3.2. Grand Challenges and deep transitions

According to FAO (2022), we are "*off-track*" with respect to the 2030 Agenda's targets and at a crossroads between a catastrophic scenario (*to do more of the same*) and to make the agrifood systems sustainability possible. Shifting from the catastrophic to the more favourable scenario calls for accepting the long-running and more sustainable choices in hard trade-offs (*trading off for sustainability*).

As the targets are "*integrated and indivisible, global in nature and universally applicable*" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, par. 55), the FAO needs for a complex set of socioeconomic and environmental drivers to assess four different scenarios ranging from the most catastrophic to the most desirable. To reach the targets, a *gradual and costly transition is needed,* as a long running transformative process whose nature is that of a socio-technical transition (Geels, Schot, 2007). In its ontological reflection, Geels (2010, p. 507) points out that sustainability is a *normative goal and a collective good problem* so that private sector has no incentives, whereas public agents and civil society play a crucial role in sustainable transition. Moreover, shared *deep-seated values and beliefs* are required to manage sustainable problems. In relation to the choice between alternative transition pathways (directionality) and related questions, the need for a more inclusive and participatory process emerges. Concerning the perception of the problem, as the cause-effect relation is lower, a key role rests in the action of social movements and public opinion. Socio-technological transition – which is mainly concerned with technological innovation in hard sectors e.g. energy, mobility etc. – is innovation-oriented, which entails facing multi-dimensional problems, through multi-actor processes in which technology, social networks and institutions lead a co-evolutive path whose intrinsic dynamic is to be delved into further. On this basis, the Multi-Level Perspective is the analytical framework to explain how and why the innovation process starting from niches-innovation can be affirmed only thanks to the large involvement of exogenous and endogenous actors (Geels, 2019) enabled to mediate between technologies and institutions (Fuenfschilling, Truffer, 2016). Coming from different disciplinary and ontological backgrounds, the socio-ecological and socio-institutional approaches have been developed to face sustainability transition referring to agriculture, fisheries, forestry and biodiversity the former, and health care, labour, education and finance, the latter (Loorbach *et al*., 2017; Patterson *et al*., 2017).

Having regard to food and agrifood systems, the question at stake is the digital transition (Lioutas *et al*., 2021) to be put in the perspective of ecological transition (Brunori, 2022) and to be also a just transition (Lamine *et al*., 2019). The intrinsic complexity of processes needs to be faced by complex innovation systems or an agricultural innovation ecosystems construct (Pigford *et al*., 2018) that identify innovation niches, where multi-actors can innovate, technologies, practices, institutions can co-evolve, in multi-scalar and cross-sectoral directions to value co-creation and co-innovation (Gomes *et al*., 2018).

Policy options can move the agrifood system towards sustainability by activating triggers such as institutions and governance, consumer awareness, income and wealth distribution and innovative technologies and approaches (FAO, 2022). The complexity of the innovation process affects the shaping of policy mixes, needing to rely upon appropriate governance systems and wide capability to involve many types of actors (Del Giudice, 2023) to form strong and structured networking (Van Oost, Vagnozzi, 2020), and point at a development model able to capture both endogenous and exogenous stimuli (Bock, 2016).

3.3. Places still matter for a just transition: focus on rural areas

Despite the global scale of the changes, places still matter and rural areas pose a twofold challenge.

The first one is the risk that such great and wide endeavours to attain social, technical, ecological, institutional change and boost innovation could have the outcome of jeopardized effects and put weak and strong areas on even more divergent pathways. In respect to climate and energy accelerating transitions, Skjølsvold and Coenen (2021) highlight that they may contribute to conflicts between core and peripheral sites, because transitions are affected by societal conditions, but also contribute to co-produce social order. Changing the geographical perspective, we reflect on how this is also meaning-

ful for rural areas. At the pace of 1 million people per year, 40% of the EU area (mostly predominantly rural) is affected by demographic decline for legacy or active trends. That is a persistent phenomenon studied over the 1993-2033 period that entails the loss of 30 million people from rural areas, denoting the intensity of urbanization on the central axis of the continent and the growing distance with respect to both the old-geographic peripherality and the new-functional peripheralization processes (European Committee of the Regions, 2023; Copus *et al*., 2020). Deemed as a social cost, the "non rurality" can be measured with respect to the urban-rural balance, following a set of cost and benefit categories (Ferrer *et al*., 2023, pp. 23-24). The political implications related to "non rurality" weight on tracing the map of the EU discontents (Dijkstra *et al*., 2020), that could have some feedback effects on the future policies, multilevel governance, democratization and inclusive growth scenarios.

The second aspect is that rural areas are critical for success in the social transition; hence, the subsequent question is what conditions are enabling rural areas to give a proactive contribution to sustainable transition. In a 2040 scenario study where rural demography and multilevel governance are critical variables, the availability of digital infrastructures and services is the most relevant requisite, besides civic engagement, technical and social innovation and efficient relationships between community and government (Bock, Krzysztofowicz, 2021). Following the EU long-term vision for rural areas to 2040, connectivity and accessibility are a key to success (European Commission, 2021). The OECD (2018) Edinburgh declaration stressed the role of innovation for successfully benefiting from key drivers; the following conference (2019) highlighted the need to centre on people and rural well-being; the more recent Cavan roadmap (OECD, 2022b, 2022a) emphasised the broadening of innovation to include social innovation and entrepreneurship. For people to remain at the centre and rural well-being, aging and depopulation have to be counteracted and managed to enable rural regeneration (Ahlmeyer, Volgmann, 2023).

To be fair, transitions must involve and benefit peripheral and rural areas. Policy mixes should foster any effort to leave behind rural areas as little as possible and to make them able to proactively contribute to achieve a just transition. This implies fostering their own development, albeit in the new meaning the word assumes. As centrality and peripherality are socially constructed and can be strategically governed (Skjølsvold. Coenen, 2021), polycentric networks and governance can help to lead transitions in the wished direction to avoid spatial and social disequilibrium.

Rural and regional topics turn back to meet again in the transition perspective.

3.4. Multidimensional concepts to be taken on board

Transitions are already happening and reality evolves faster than our understanding, rapidly making our paradigms obsolete and insufficient, so much so that we use them with a new semantic that tends to broaden the meaning of the keywords. In this limited review we focus on some of the most relevant to argue our standing.

As a first example, proximity is no longer just geographical and physical, as communication technology makes the distance between people zero, so that access to digital infrastructure is becoming a key driver for proximity (Bock, 2016).

Scholars with different approaches are recasting the concept of development by adding new attributes to better align it with reality and the new directions to take. After the earlier neo-endogenous approach (Lowe *et al*., 1995; Ray, 2000, 2006) – that marks the need for national or European action to support and enable the local initiatives – one can goes beyond. The "nexogenous" approach focuses on the spatial dimension aiming to reconnect urbanised and marginalised rural areas and within this perspective considers the socio-political system as an *"engine of revitalisation"* (Bock, 2016). Similarly local development – as focused only on productive structures and their ability to innovate – and governance – as based on the "*myth*" of spontaneous self organisation of local actors "*acting without organisational or structuring opinions tools*" (Torre, 2023, p. 4) – are going to embrace a broader meaning to attempt to deal with the complexity of the transitions in progress. Torre (2023) provides a new definition of *territorial development* based on a broader idea of territorial innovation that consists of organisational, social and institutional changes, besides the technological one. Territory is a space of organised relationships among local actors linked through a common project (he refers to Sack, 1986) and besides production, the territorial governance is the latter engine that moves territorial innovation in an interacting continuum. The conception of *territorial governance* is very structured and based on the utilisation of a set of tools and structures to make dialogue and cooperation possible among actors who have asymmetrical resources. Territorial governance must also produce norms and rules able to *"structure the behaviour of the actors"*. In the concept of territorial governance, land use and employment are integrated as matters on which all territorial actors must have a voice and participate in a collaborative project or definition.

Continuing with examples of some basic concepts that are expanding their meaning and among those that are needed to rebuild a framework, we regard a food system (hereafter FS) as the economic and relational space where district phenomena could happen. FS is a basic concept for the agricultural domain that is broadening its meaning. The new complexity of FS and its governance stems from positioning the traditional concept[13] to face environmental and social changes, taken as the main drivers (Ericksen, 2008). Yet, there are several definitions that rely upon different frames stressing different features. Following Hospes and Brons (2016), there are various definitions of FS that: i) take into account activities, outcomes, natural resources and institutions; ii) are multi-scale, global, national or local scale (even if Enthoven and Van den Broeck *et al*. (2021) refer to the difficulty in clarifying the concept of local FS since confusion reigns on definitions of FS at local scale); iii) encompass a dimension of interconnectedness across scales and actors, between systems and within biophysical and human environments.

The main scientific frame, beyond "old" food chain, is the social-ecological-system (SES) which refers to Ericksen conceptualization and the complex adaptive system (CAS). Both emphasize "*the complex, interactive and dynamic nature*" of an FS (Hospes, Brons, 2016, p. 21) that has also been defined as a *system of systems*" by Hipel *et al*. (2010) quoted in Hospes and Brons (2016, p. 19). In this broader FS idea, governance plays a central role. Yet, when it refers to complex FSs, governance takes adjectives each one highlighting its main function. Reflexive governance highlights the need to give voice to the less powered by providing spaces for deliberation. Adaptive governance aims at building adaptive capacity to deal with uncertainty due to external drivers and to understand ecosystem dynamics while supporting flexible institutions for multilevel governance. Transformative governance is considered a driver of change of FS based on the role of institutions for collective actions, which can be very effective, even more than policies (van Bers *et al*., 2019). It should be inclusive, adaptive, integrative and pluralist (Visseren-Hamakers *et al*., 2021) to cope with complexity and adopt a collaborative knowledge production system. It can allow socio-technical transition and resilience of ecosystems to be orchestrated by improving adaptiveness, following a conceptual framework based upon the balanced presence of diversity, connectivity, polycentricity, redundancy and directionality (Könnölä *et al*., 2021).

The theme of FS's governance is growing, also thanks to new experiences, e.g. Food systems networks, understood as *governance instruments*. As Jørgensen *et al*. (2021) put it *"Networks have to be activated to be meaningful. Interaction is embedded in local traditions and social order is produced locally"*. Researchers engage to frame and measure a concept of *governance efficacy* as an explication of why and how some peripheral location *is able to manage social challenges despite population decline*.

These examples clearly explain the need to provide a new semantic toolbox before taking the road to reconstruct a conceptual framework of the districts. More in general, we must take stock of these broadened, multidimensional concepts that push researchers to go beyond the traditional, simpler ones that have been used in the previous approaches on which the current concept of districts in agricultural and rural domain also relies. The caveat is to avoid adopting such a generic and insignificant idea of "complexity" that surrounds everything only by prefixing the old words with a "co-", because the "co-" is not enough to take into account the multiple dimensions of the changing processes and we must know the complexity we need to manage.

A new generation of district is expected to arise also in agriculture, in order to be up to the tasks currently challenging the FSs. The old districts, conceptually fragile, when faced with the complexity of the new problems seem to have the lowest odds. Yet this is the hard task we hope the scientific community will stick to.

4. LOOKING AHEAD

The conceptual weakness of districts in the agricultural and rural domain is the issue at stake that we must urgently consider in order to clear up and update the matter. This should allow us to identify districts and to distinguish them from other organisational phenomena or governance arrangements, or the banal identification with the more general food systems. Thanks to a reformulation of the concept, capable of overcoming the current dichotomy, an appropriate vocabulary and precise definitions should be obtained. The path ahead is fraught with difficulties to be overcome. We conclude with some considerations about caveat and difficulties.

First of all, one may argue that the reframing should be concerned with a new generation of districts that has not yet arisen[14], mainly for two reasons: i) policy interventions have encouraged (and still are encouraging) the sectoral and supply-chain approach, so that discouraging a possible evolution towards more complex issues concerned with sustainability; ii) the majority relies on

[13] Defined by means of its characteristic activities: producing, processing-packaging, distributing-retailing, consuming (Ericksen, 2008)

[14] We suppose it as the lack of research due to limited data availability.

sectoral structures of governance (see sect. 2.1) that are unlike to be opened to the emerging feelings of civil society, e.g. on food policies (Berti *et al*., 2024 forthcoming). As a consequence, there is no (or at least a limited) possibility of developing an inductive pathway.

A basilar one concerns the reference concept for the notion of district, that of Becattini's MID which, according to Sforzi (2015), is now acquired by economic research (Bellanca, 2023). Yet, it is not easy to handle in the agricultural and rural domain, as widely argued in sect. 1.2. This requires the definition of a robust theoretical framework capable of linking the social and productive components together and which allows us to resort to a correctly founded abstraction process, keeping in mind that the MID was instead built inductively.

In addition, a broadening concept of food systems and their governance should necessarily be used. So, a third kind of difficulty relies on the great abundance of literature and frameworks developed in the last decades on food systems and their governance to face sustainability and other topics linked to transitions, even crossing the scales (having the major critical issue in the lowest). The criteria of the choice, besides the choice *per se*, should be deeply pondered. Similar considerations apply when you come to the many kinds of transitions at stake, with related abundance of scientific knowledge produced starting from many and multidisciplinary approaches. Multidisciplinarity requires paying attention to the theoretical and epistemological coherence.

Rural areas upgrading with society and territorial development are equally required to be represented in the new framework. From a conceptual point of view, this aspect brings up the well-known problems about what (kind of) rural areas are. Although some scholars demand some new classification (e.g. Mantino, 2021), we know that if a framework is built referring to such a classification, then a plethora of subtly differentiated concepts will arise and confusion will reign.

Not least, in a regional perspective, an issue of spatial equilibrium and territorial rebalancing arose in the previous discussion. The framework for territorial development by Torre (2023) shows several stimuli to be taken into account. The request to achieve an unitarian theoretical approach grounding on the huge literature on the cognitive approach to local development (De Rosa, Turri, 2004) does not need to be avoided at all, but rests a problematic task to achieve.

The caveat is for the risk of an overly complex concept, whereas there is the need for a framework that is theoretically coherent with the topics we deal with, but also easy to handle and robust to use. In fact the new concept should be largely assessed. The complexity generates another critical issue, because any simplification must to be pondered and justified in relation to the choice about what is more and less relevant to include.

The previous considerations are meant to be a provocation to go beyond the current approach to district discourse in agriculture, so that we can better prepare to meet current challenges. We hope that the scientific community will contribute to develop and deepen the work that this note has started. Such a new generation of district could pose a challenge to policymakers from several points of view.

The gap between science and politics should be bridged, which in turn entails a coherent policy framework that allows consistent ex ante analysis and ex post evaluation of the policy impact. Not so easy to do, as such an articulated conception of the "new" district is likely to correspond to policy mixes crossing a sectoral approach, firstly matching with policy frameworks for innovation (Stam, 2015). Developing toward sustainability, the new policy framework should be coherent with the Framework Law on Sustainable Food Systems that is expected by the European Parliament. Being consequent to the Farm to Fork Strategy (European Commission, 2020), the law should allow coherence between national and European levels in order to progressively raise sustainability standards (Poppe, 2022).

The territorial perspective should be taken on board, thinking an ideal response to the request posed by Bandini for a policy tailored to the different territories. Within a somewhat different perspective is the idea of rethinking rural development as part of the CAP (Ferrer *et al*., 2023) or at least the LEADER programme to be posed in the framework of regional policy (Ahlmeyer, Volgmann, 2023), which are stimuli still present in the thinking of several scholars.

Certainly the need for a law able to outline a clear legal framework, consistent with the conceptual one, is key. Before producing a new law, the need should be considered for broader spaces of discussion and debate involving also public opinion to reflect on the direction to undertake, as the questions at stake are involving society as a whole, not just agricultural or even rural actors; yet this opening is desirable but not so obvious.

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APPENDIX

Box 1. The narrative of the seminal Maremma Rural District (MRD).

The MRD promoted by Pacciani in 1996 aimed to give concrete implementation to the new orientations of the reforming CAP and Rural development policy (RDP) that were (and still are) in the process of being developed. The MRD, which was implemented in an underdeveloped rural area, had three main features. Firstly, it aimed to achieve sustainable socio-economic development and to strengthen the economic, social and territorial cohesion of an identity area in which agriculture could have a leading role though alongside other development drivers. Secondly, those drivers were: improving public and private tangible and intangible assets; raising the quality of resources, production and processes to improve the environmental sustainability of production; relaunching the local identity and external image of the Maremma by operating within a systemic and territorial strategy to achieve a Maremma Quality System. Thirdly, the MRD was driven by a territorial governance that was already multi-level at sub-national scale and that allowed access to pluri-funds and facilitated the multiple tasks of the district projects, following principles of prioritization of objectives on which to concentrate the public funds that were to be used co-ordinately. The MRD has clearly confirmed the importance of the concept of rural territory as a relational space within which local actors can interact with each other. By virtue of this idea of governance, the MRD proposed itself as such a space, and was thereby legitimized to contribute to programming rural policies at regional and local scale. The MRD experience has affected the subsequent shaping of national and some regional laws.

Source: (Pacciani, 1997, 2002, 2003; Pacciani, Toccaceli, 2010; Belletti, Marescotti, 2010).