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The Multidisciplinary Approach of Rural Studies - Research article

The institutional analysis of rural development processes: an interpretation of the writings of Flaminia Ventura

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Abstract. Institutional analysis of rural development (IARD) is characterised by systematic attention given to the institutional dimensions of the rural development process. While different research enquiries have been developed in recent decades, which can be framed by rural development, a systematic understanding of its analytical features, research method and main results has not yet been achieved. This study aims to elaborate on a particular series of studies connecting agricultural economics and rural sociology by categories drawn mainly from new institutional economics. Therefore, the objective is to identify the contribution of this approach to IARD. Two subsequent stages of reflection are identified: the first articulates the analysis of the nexus between the concept of organisation and that of farming style, and the second makes the picture more complex based by connecting the territory, the sociotechnical systems and the organisation effectively and coherently. Finally, this study seeks to delineate possible areas of research that could contribute to advance IARD.

Keywords: rural development, neo-institutional economics, organisation, farming style, autonomy.

JEL codes: Q13, O35, Z13.

HIGHLIGHTS

- In the analysis of rural development processes, institutions should take centre stage.
- The centrality of institutions requires some major theoretical innovations that are encountered at the interface of neo-institutional economic analysis and rural sociology.
- This approach leads to critically combining the analysis of transactions and enquiry into farming styles and a focus on the interaction between biological and socio-technical subsystems in rural space and economy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of rural development processes must consider political, social and economic institutions as central features of rural economies. In fact, *institutional analysis of rural development* (IARD) is a key stream of theory and empirical analysis in rural studies. It refers to an enormous area of research within which the institutional dimensions of rural development take centre stage. IARD is a multidisciplinary field of study that embraces different units of analysis and allows for the application of various conceptual frameworks. The interplay among different disciplines has contributed to progressively delimitate IARD, drawing conceptual achievements and categories especially from rural development analysis, agricultural economics, local development theory and economic geography. Different theoretical bases have been adopted to develop studies of the institutional dimensions of the rural development processes. In general, rural sociologists have sought to overcome the modernisation paradigm and to discover idiosyncratic patterns of development (van der Ploeg, Saccomandi, 1995; Lowe *et al.*, 1998; Woods, 2011). Moreover, the outcomes of local development studies (Becattini, 1982) have provided different conceptual bases, centred on the idea of territory as a socio-economic entity, and have triggered new lines of rural development analysis, mobilising multiple-concept networks and inducing different disciplines to converge towards common sets of issues (Musotti, 2000; Belletti, 2002; Camagni, 2016). Capello (2011), in particular, offered a comparative analysis of regional development theories, highlighting among them the ability of local development theory to account for the heterogeneity of territories as a factor in their competitiveness. From this perspective, territories base their distinctive development opportunities on the heterogeneity of activities as well as exchange relations and institutions (Tinacci Mossello, 2002; Abbozzo, Martino, 2004; Capello *et al.*, 2020). Thus, studies on rural development institutions and territories have progressively evolved through various theoretical perspectives. In this context, the objective has been to identify a specific adaptation of the conceptual frameworks typical of new institutional economics (NIE) (Saccomandi, 1995), as well as a recognition of the specificity of network forms (Murdoch, 1988; Powell, 1990) and its explanatory power. With this approach, several theoretical issues have arisen – starting from the diversity of the units of analysis central to the aforementioned perspectives – but it also invites scholars to engage with two crucial questions. The first concerns the evident organisational variety of agri-food economies (Saccomandi, 1995; Martino *et al.*, 2017)

and rural territories (Abbozzo, Martino, 2004; Capello, 2011). The second involves the relationship between the level of actors (particularly territorial ones, primarily farms) and the broader layer of institutional environment, whose recent developments seem able to provide new instruments of analysis (Ménard, 2014; Abbott, 2017; Ménard *et al.*, 2022).

This study does not account for a comprehensive examination of IARD, which would require efforts from different disciplines; rather, it aims to clarify the very nature of a specific contribution to the definition of IARD, namely rural sociology and NIE. The specific objective is to discuss the approach theoretically inspired by NIE concepts that focus on, as far as the empirical field is concerned, especially, albeit not exclusively, economic features and dynamics. The key concept adopted here is the analytical path entailed in the writings of Flaminia Ventura (van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2023). Ventura's work represents a strategic contribution to IARD, especially in regard to the interaction between rural sociology and NIE and the interface between the territorial base of agriculture and the variety of its organisational forms. The intention is to show how this specific analytical path, on the one hand, is rooted in the joint work of Vito Saccomandi and Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (Van der Ploeg, *this issue*)¹, and, on the other hand, can be used to establish a dialogue with recent development in NIE (Ménard, 2014, 2017, 2018; Kunneke *et al.*, 2021; Ménard, Martino, 2024), which in turn could enhance IARD.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces the analytical path that studies rural development in light of organisational transformation and farming style analysis. Section 3 builds on new insights elaborated in institutional analysis and subsequently delineates possibilities for further deepening the study of rural development processes. Lastly, Section 4 presents some final remarks.

2. NEW INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMICS AND INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT: AN INTERPRETATION

2.1. Basic analytical elements

There are different theoretical paths involved in the exploration of rural development processes; together,

¹ It is impossible to fully account here for the richness of the Italian experience and its leading actors. The volume edited by Valorosi, Torquati (2007) as well as the *Proceedings of the Giornate Tassinari per l'Economia e la Politica Agraria*, held in Assisi (Italy), provide a main introduction to the related area of study.

they highlight their multidimensional dynamics and impacts, the multiplicity of the scales involved and, above all, the multi-actor aspects. These different paths also pay attention to institutional dimensions, but they follow various approaches. Indeed, approaches that draw from the institutional analysis and development framework, old institutional economics (Derville, Allaire, 2014; Derville 2023) and convention theory (Marescotti *et al.*, 2000; Tregear *et al.*, 2023) – as well as specific results from local development analysis (Arrighetti *et al.*, 1997; Gabi Dei Ottati, 1994) – have produced a corpus for the IARD process, in which rural sociology and NIE have a relevant role.

The line of reflection considered here is characterised by the use of key analytical elements of both NIE, as projected in the field of agricultural economics analysis (Saccomandi, 1995), and rural sociology (van der Ploeg, *this issue*). This combination rightly generates the question of whether we are dealing with a well-argued eclecticism or with (the beginning of) a coherent integration that is justified (and defensible) both conceptually and methodologically. This article proposes to answer this question by referring to two middle-range theories developed within the institutional analysis framework. It should be noted that the very concept of ‘institution’ is defined differently depending on the context of the theoretical approach (Hodgson, 2006; Ménard, Martino, 2024). In this study, institutions are understood as the set of norms and rules embedded in devices and mechanisms that emerge from interactions among agents (or classes of agents) in search of coordination to face states of nature (Ménard, Martino, 2024). Following Ostrom (2005), institutional analysis seeks, first, to identify universal components that underline markets, hierarchies and other complex situations and, second, to verify whether these components constitute fundamental parts of theories that are able to explain regularities in human behaviour across diverse situations (Ostrom, 2005). In institutional analysis, *frameworks* identify elements that are considered to be such components. Frameworks also provide a general list of variables and a meta-theoretic language to be used to discuss theories and to identify universal elements. Accordingly, theories enable a researcher to specify which elements of the frameworks are particularly relevant for specific research questions. Theories carry, and focus on, a framework and thus make specific assumptions necessary for a correct diagnosis of the phenomenon to be investigated, a correct explanation of processes and their dynamics and a probable prediction of outcomes (Ostrom, 2009).

In the IARD framework, the dialogue between rural

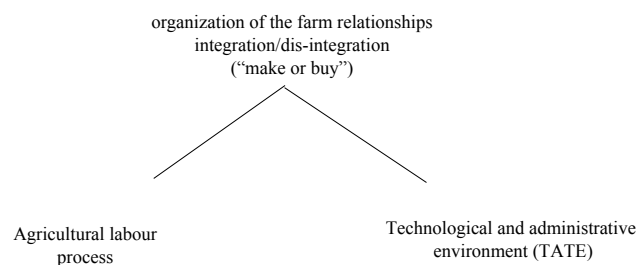
sociology and NIE is grounded in, and inspired by, a joint meta-theoretic language that necessarily orients attention to the interfaces of ‘the social’ and ‘the economic’, the shifts of meaning occurring at these interfaces and, consequently, the institutions facilitating such shifts (or, as is equally possible, preventing them). The first consequence of this dialogue is that IARD becomes progressively endowed with a coherent set of analytical tools to investigate rural development processes; it is also grounded in, and part of, the metatheoretical language required for the analysis of such processes. The second consequence is that IARD, owing to its genetic relationships with rural sociology and NIE, contributes to the original definition of *institutions* in relation to rural development.

2.2. Theory of organisational transformation and farming styles

Central to the approach discussed here is the assumption that the organisation of interrelations within and along the food chain should be investigated from a dual angle (see also Figure 1): first, with respect to the wider set of relationships influencing the operation of the farm (Benvenuti, 1982; Ventura, 2008), and second, considering the dynamics of the agricultural labour process (van der Ploeg, 1988). This assumption can be easily identified in the studies by Saccomandi (1995) and Van der Ploeg, Saccomandi (1995).

The *theory of the organisational transformation* represents a key analytical step in the understanding of the agri-food chain institutional dimensions (Saccomandi, 1991). While it provides basic tools to understand the organisational variety of the agri-food chain (coherently with the new institutional thought, see among others Ménard, Valceschini, 2005), it also aims to build upon a comprehensive understanding of rural development processes. This effort primarily considers the necessity of explaining the organisational changes of farms consistently with the understanding of the territorial processes that are at the core of rural development. As we have

Figure 1. Conceptualising the organisational change in farming.

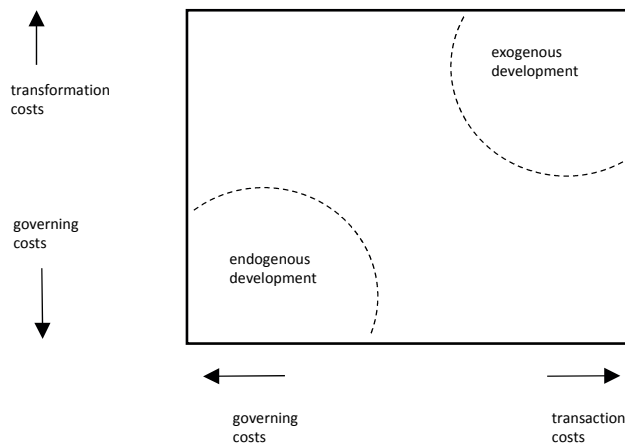


seen, the first attempts to establish this coherence was the connection of change with the labour process and the ‘external environment’.

A consequence of the hypothesis illustrated in Figure 1 is that the organisational plan and specific development path of the farm (the calculation and planning as stated by Williamson, 1993) is understood only if the dynamics of the farm as a land–labour institution and the impact of the external environment are considered properly. In this way, the integration of rural sociology and NIE, as entailed in rural studies, clearly comes to the forefront as a theoretical (and empirical) area of the more general NIE tradition – areas need to be endowed progressively endowed with the original tools. This article seeks to account for the identification of such tools, at least some of them.

NIE fosters concepts that are most relevant for the exploration of rural development processes in Europe. Based on the original assumption, adoption of the concept of a *governance structure* represented a major step ahead, especially the conceptualisation by Williamson (1985), which provides the most useful analytical tool for understanding the transformation of farming activities. The way in which the farm is connected to both the upstream and downstream stages of the food chain was progressively understood in terms of the *organisation of transactions* between the agricultural and processing stages (Saccomandi, 1985, 1991). This point of view fundamentally renewed the conceptualisation of the agricultural market and subsequently provides room for the empirical investigation of the *modes of organisation*. It represented a decisive step beyond the standard neo-classical focus on market exchange and allowed for the elaboration of a *theory of organisational transformation* that aims to explain how the dynamics of organisational choices relate to the diversity of development paths in agriculture. Williamson (1985) argued that a good can be bought on the market (‘buy’ option) or produced in and by the firm itself (‘make’ option). Consistent with the discrete alignment principle and second-order economisation introduced by Williamson (1985), van der Ploeg, Saccomandi (1995) explored the implications of this model for the organisation and development of farms. Farmers make organisational decisions by comparing the transaction cost associated with an alternative organisation to the cost of governing the farm without entering into such an alternative. This notion also translates to the level of alternative rural development trajectories. *Endogenous* development is based mainly, but not exclusively, on locally available resources, making full use of the ecology, labour force and knowledge of an area, as well as the locally developed organisational patterns that link

Figure 2. Schematic representation of costs involved in exogenous and endogenous development.



Source: adapted from van der Ploeg, Saccomandi (1995).

production and consumption (van der Ploeg, Saccomandi, 1995: 10). In contrast, *exogenous* development requires an increased number of transactions characterised by comparatively high transaction and transformation costs, whereas endogenous development results in low levels for these cost categories (see Figure 2, in which the costs of governing the production process correspond to the transaction costs of the ‘make’ option)².

In Figure 2, the transformation costs (vertical axis) are involved in the reorganisation of a farm according to the new technological models proposed by the development process (van der Ploeg, Saccomandi, 1995: 25, Note 10). These are jointly considered with the costs of governing the technological model adopted by the farms. The more farms follow an exogenous development path, the larger the transformation and the governing costs. The transaction costs (horizontal axis) are also jointly considered with the governing costs. Figure 2 shows that the exogeneous development process tends to increase the complexity of the exchange for the farms and the transaction and governing costs they face.

The IARD perspective in this paper considers organisational polymorphism (Saccomandi, 1998, 1991) and addresses it with the theory of organisational transformation (Saccomandi, van der Ploeg, 1994). By doing so, it fully embraces its relationships with economic-agrarian reflection and its premises. Among these, the following are of particular interest here: (1) the observation of

² The attributes ‘endogenous’ and ‘exogenous’ correspond to a level of debate that was partially overcome in subsequent work (Gkartzios, Lowe, 2019; Cejudo, Navarro, 2020). The references cited in the text are sufficient to capture the key meaning. It is beyond the scope of this article to account for the development of the debate.

the variety of organisational forms in the agro-industrial system, (2) the identification of entrepreneurial choice as the main cause of polymorphism (Saccomandi, van der Ploeg, 1994), and (3) the recognition that the agro-industrial structure is strongly influenced by processes of horizontal and vertical integration (van der Ploeg, 1995). The new-institutionalist thesis of economisation (Williamson, 1985) is of particular importance with respect to these elements. This view is built on Coase's (1937, 1960) fundamental intuition and its subsequent analytical developments, where the organisational problem is framed in terms of the neo-institutionalist thesis (Williamson, 1985). Consequently, the variety and organisational changes observed in the agro-industrial reality is explained by the decision-making process undertaken by the enterprise, which is considered to be the main economic agent in the theoretical interpretation of empirical constellations (Saccomandi, 1998). Hence, a perspective that prioritises society as a whole cannot explain the institutional structure; rather, it interprets individual behaviours as *conditioned* by the wider social process (Coase, 1992).

In this context, *farming style* is a central category (van der Ploeg, 1994). It is understood as an entrepreneurial approach that centres on the combination of agricultural resources to achieve economic (and social) objectives that are defined, although not always consciously, by farmers. The concept allows us to conceptualise the specific organisation and development of the farm as a social construct. More specifically, it refers to the specific ways in which the farm labour process is organised (van der Ploeg, 1994). A farming style can be defined as a consistent pattern that includes the following elements (Ventura, 2023a: 38-39):

- a specific set of strategic notions, values, capacities and information (i.e. culture repertoire) shared by a particular group of farmers that specifies how farming should be organised;
- a specific and coherent way of structuring farm practices that corresponds to the strategic design (or cultural reporting) used by these farmers; and
- a specific set of relationships between the farm and the surrounding markets for both input and output flows, the actors that operate in these markets as well as the political and social institutions and technological development.

Adopting an NIE perspective in rural development studies leads to two results. First, the heterogeneity of the farms is studied in terms of comparisons between transformation and transaction costs, a feature that endows rural studies with a powerful analytical tool. Second, the 'dry' Williamsonian *contractual man* (Wil-

liamson, 1985) is replaced with 'living' farming styles. Simultaneously, these styles are enriched by the contracting dimension:

A style of farming can therefore be understood as the 'organizational plan' of the farm enterprise. It reflects, and is informed by, the coherent and normative choices of the farmer concerning the interplay of internal and external resources. Different balances between the internal and external resources (reflecting approaches that veer towards the endogenous or exogenous) are evaluated differently by the farmers on the basis of their experience, their propensity to risk and the influence of the social, economic and institutional contexts to which they relate. (Ventura, 2023a: 26)

An organisation includes rules. Therefore, recognition of the organisational nature of farming styles is an important analytical outcome, as it brings to light its institutional dimensions and connects it to the wider institutional order and dynamics (including rural development processes). More precisely, Ventura's proposal of interpreting the farming style in organisational terms contributes to connect rural sociology and NIE to agri-food analysis. In this view, the organisational variety of the agri-food chain is still understood in terms of the organisation of the transactions (Martino *et al.*, 2017; Ménard, 2018). The farming style appears to be able to characterise the transaction the farm undertakes and, in turn, it is affected by the modalities chosen to organise the transaction.

2.3. Exploring the connection with territory: from the external environment to localities

Originally concerned with the role of the external environment as constituting a system of influences and constraints on farmers' entrepreneurship (Benvenuti, 1982; Saccomandi, 1991), rural development studies have progressively taken advantage of the large literature on local development (Iacoponi *et al.*, 1995; Musotti, 1997; Ray, 1997; Becattini, 2004; van der Ploeg *et al.*, 2008; Ventura, 2023a). The idea of *locality* goes beyond a simplified view of context and tends rather to integrate multiple dimensions of *space*: spatial practices, which range from individual routines to the systematic creation of zones and regions; representations of space, that is, forms of knowledge and practices that organise and represent space; spaces of representation; or collective experiences of space, which in turn include symbolic differentiations and collective fantasies about space, resistance to dominant practices, and the resulting forms of individual and collective transgression (Urry, 2001: 11). The

connections between the farming styles, rural development processes and locality depend on the institutional order of space: farming styles are grounded in political and social institutions, integrate cultural repertoires and are articulated through their organisation plans (Ventura, 2023a). On the other hand, as noted above, transformational patterns at the farm level contribute to the specificity of rural development at the territorial level and, consequently, to its organisational variety. The idea of identifying a taxonomy of local systems on the basis of modes of organisation and spatial divisions of labour in rural systems (Ventura, 2023: 34-35) helps to theoretically underpin the organisational variety in agricultural sectors (Lamine *et al.*, 2012, 2019; Belletti *et al.*, 2017; Martino *et al.*, 2017).

It is necessary to note that labour process analysis enters this theoretical construction at least at two levels: the labour process is seen as a constitutive pillar of different farming styles, and the transformation of the labour process is understood as both resulting from and impacting the transformation of the organisation. Hence, organisational transformation is a theory of change of the farm and a theory of how the labour process affects the wider connection between nature and society, that is, as a driver of the reproduction of the farm's resources (van der Ploeg, *this issue*).

2.4. Peasant innovativeness and organisational transformation

Rural studies scholars are aware that the dynamics that are observable in rural systems cannot be fully understood without considering the innovative pushes activated by the farmers themselves (van der Ploeg, *this issue*). This implies that the theory of organisational transformation aims to include a comprehensive theorisation of innovation and novelty production. A sociotechnical system (STS) is a powerful and innovative concept that shapes multiple areas of study. An STS embraces production, diffusion and the use of technology: it is defined as the linkages between the elements necessary to fulfil societal functions and consists of artefacts, knowledge, capital, labour and cultural meaning, among others (Geels, 2004). Innovation is a key issue in this context, as the system tends to limit the possibility of radical change except for *niches* that provide locations for learning processes – for example, about technical specifications, user preferences, public policies, and symbolic meanings (Geels, 2004: 922). Rural studies scholars utilise the STS approach by considering – beyond the general structure – the concepts of novelty and niche (Wiskerke, Van der Ploeg, 2004). According to

Geels (2004), novelty is a modification of, and sometimes a break with, existing routines. It is, in a way, a deviation. It might emerge and function as a new insight into an existing practice or might consist of a new practice. Novelty is mostly a new way of doing and thinking – a new mode that has the potential to do better or to be superior to existing routines. Therefore, in rural development studies, novelties can indeed be seen as *seeds of transition* (van der Ploeg, 2004).

New ways of organising endogenous resources to overcome system constraints and to put into place strategies for diversification might equally represent novelties, especially if they generate *synergies* between internal and external resources (Ventura, 2023b: 222). In Figure 2, such synergies are conceptualised in terms of economies of scope. The boundary between the internal and external relations is set by the comparative magnitude of the governance and transaction costs, with the sociotechnical regime setting the possibilities for innovating and capturing economies of scope as well as contributing to the levels of costs incurred.

This perspective reconceptualises the theory of organisational transformation and proposes the idea that niches in rural development are locations where it is possible to deviate from the rules in the existing regime, thus providing potential room for radical innovations. Niches are parts of an STS in which interactions among rural actors can constitute new possibilities and practices, exploit emerging nested markets and increase the possibilities that come with increased autonomy (Van der Ploeg, Schneider, 2022; Milone, Ventura, 2024). The concept of *changing farm boundaries* (Ventura, Milone, 2005) systematises the idea of organisational changes and situates itself at the core of rural studies (van der Ploeg, *this issue*): deepening, broadening and re-grounding are all related to changes in the boundaries of the firm and the associated consequences in the neo-institutional terms of integration/disintegration.

In summary, as argued above, rural studies connect the organisational change of the farm – essentially seen in terms of NIE – with the territory, namely its characteristics and dynamics. Owing to the very nature of agriculture, it is necessary to account for territory and to integrate it theoretically with the understanding of sociotechnical regimes. Second, it is necessary to conceptualise the territory in a coherent way with the organisation of the farm, and this is done with the concepts of institutions and systems. *Rural institutions* have the distinctive function of aligning farms and territories into a coherent and dynamic whole, which allows for the proper unfolding of the rural development process. There are a proper set of norms and rules embedded in

devices and mechanisms that emerge from interactions among rural agents in search of coordination in a rural territory.

3. NEW TASKS FOR NEW INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMICS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF RURAL STUDIES?

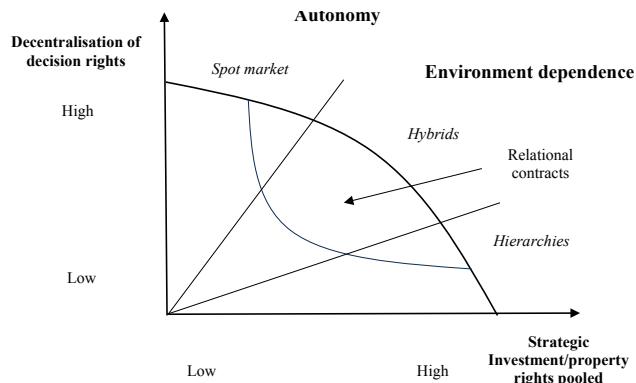
Thus far, this paper has argued that it is important, both theoretically and practically, to identify the institutional order of the territory and the dynamics that create it. The organisation set by the farm is a micro-institution that engages agents involved in transactions. Recent developments in NIE seem to add additional strength to the analysis of rural development processes. First, NIE has enriched the representation of the institutional framework of an economy by identifying three layers (Ménard, 2014, 2017, 2018; Kunneke *et al.*, 2021): the macro-, meso- and micro-layers. Each layer is characterised by a distinctively different role in: (1) defining, allocating and monitoring property and decision rights; (2) establishing devices and mechanisms for the implementation of these rights; and (3) framing the way operators transact these rights. Meso-institutions bridge the gap between the macro- and micro-layers, making the macro-rules operational and allowing the micro-agents to implement them (Ménard, 2014, 2017, 2018; Kunneke *et al.*, 2021)³. For this purpose, meso-institutions carry out three functions: (1) they *interpret* and *adapt* rules and norms generated at the macro-level, making them context specific to a sector and/or a country and/or a region and allowing agents to organise their transactions within the environment thus framed; (2) they *monitor* the actual implementation of rules and norms by those micro-institutions that organise the production and distribution of goods and services; and (3) they *enforce* these rules and may transmit feedback by connecting policy-makers and operators.

Identifying and analysing meso-institutions in rural development is an urgent task. The heterogeneity of rural space is the outcome of the interaction between farming styles and the institutions operating on the meso- and micro-layers. Changing farm boundaries is at the core of current rural development processes (van der Ploeg, *this issue*): these boundaries can be understood as the outcome of meso-institutions properly channeling the choice at the micro-institutional level. On the

other hand, rural development studies also underline the possibility of micro-level institutions triggering change at other levels. A theory that has been properly developed on meso-level institutions could provide a logical frame for understanding how rural institutions can be designed and made effective based on increasing innovativeness and sustainability (Milone, Ventura, 2024). Moreover, meso-institutional theory could provide effective tools for rural development analysts and lead them to properly address the multiple dilemmas faced by agricultural actors (Van der Ploeg, *this issue*).

Furthermore, the identification of proper farming models (that is, more innovative and more sustainable) could be facilitated by considering modes of governance that differ in terms of the allocation of decision and property rights (Ménard, 2013). Regarding a specific transaction, Figure 3 distinguishes between different organisational solutions in terms of centralisation/decentralisation of decision-making and ownership rights among the parties involved. The horizontal axis represents strategic investments for a transaction and can thus also be interpreted in terms of property rights: these rights become increasingly centralised as one moves further from the axis origin. The vertical axis, on the other hand, pertains to decision-making rights over resources: the farther from the origin, the more decentralised these rights are among the parties involved in the transaction. Figure 3 highlights the need for an efficient combination of rights allocation according to the characteristics of the transaction: the more concentrated the investment in strategic resources, the less decentralised the decision-making rights. Thus, the area outlined by the axes identifies alternative governance structures (the theoretical boundaries between the three possible structures – market, hybrid and firm – are highlighted). The analysis developed in Ventura’s studies can be relat-

Figure 3. Decision rights and property rights.



Source: adapted from Ménard (2018).

³ The concept of a meso-institution, introduced by Misa (1994), was developed into a comprehensive theory by Ménard (2014, 2017). A similar approach is being developed in political sciences (Abbott *et al.*, 2017). See also Ménard, Martino (2024)

ed to this theoretical framework, positioning autonomy as opposed to dependence on the external environment.

This representation also allows for examples of rural institutions as defined above. For example, the consortia engaged in the management of geographical indications perform meso-institutional functions: while their activities are carried out across the entire territory recognised in their statutes – also incorporating practices related to traditional production and consumption – their establishment foresees that certain decision-making rights regarding company resources are partially transferred to the consortia themselves, such as decisions related to production technology and, at times, the planning of production itself (Martino *et al.*, 2016). Additional examples include supply chain contracts aimed at organising the offerings of specific territories by defining the combination of property rights and decision-making within agricultural enterprises (Scaramuzzi *et al.*, 2020), as well as quality certification processes according to participatory schemes (Sacchi *et al.*, 2023).

4. FINAL REMARKS

This article has outlined, and further explored, the institutional analysis of rural development processes by building on selected achievements contained in the work of Flaminia Ventura. It has shown how, by building on this work, NIE can further strengthen and enrich rural studies and, more specifically, how different concepts can be tied together in a coherent and probably convincing conceptual network. Moreover, increased levels of farmer autonomy seem to be achievable through the construction of adequate rural institutions. Consequently, additional efforts are needed to explore the meso-institutional layer in rural development and to characterise farm styles better in terms of decision-making and property rights.

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