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The Multidisciplinary Approach of Rural Studies - Editorial

## Make or buy: that is the question for rural development.

### *A collection of essays in memory of Flaminia Ventura*

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Rural development is the arena where some of the most critical challenges of our time are faced—issues such as the unequal distribution of resources, famine reduction, sustainability, climate change, food security, and food safety. This multifaceted and complex field demands the attention of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers alike. Addressing these challenges requires diverse expertise, spanning economic and technical knowledge as well as pragmatic, problem-solving capabilities to craft effective frameworks for interpretation and action.

Flaminia Ventura stands as one of the most exemplary contributors to this endeavour, dedicating her intellectual rigour and practical insights to improving the quality of life in rural areas – a mission with implications for the broader civic community. Her work bridged theoretical complexity with practical relevance, offering decision-makers in public and private sectors actionable solutions to pressing rural management issues. Her untimely passing has left a void in the field, depriving us of a pillar of knowledge and expertise in this ongoing struggle.

In honour of her legacy, REA-Italian Review of Agricultural Economics has dedicated this issue to advancing the research and policy discourse on rural development, inspired by Ventura's unparalleled contributions. This collection brings together six researchers who had the privilege of collaborating with Ventura, benefitting not only from her professional mentorship but also from her friendship. These contributors represent a select group of scholars who go beyond merely assessing rural territories, actively generating new knowledge in theory, methodology, and regulatory strategies to promote rural development.

The six papers presented here are united by a shared focus on neo-institutional analysis as a powerful framework for addressing the intricate, interdisciplinary challenges of rural development. This thematic coherence is purposeful: the Perugia school, to which Ventura and her colleagues have made significant contributions, is recognised as a leading national and international reference point for the neo-institutional approach to rural studies.

Jan Douwe van der Ploeg explores the essence of rural studies and highlights the role of Ventura and her colleagues in applying a transaction costs perspective to the field. The “make-or-buy” framework emerges as a unifying tool, integrating insights from diverse disciplines and moving beyond deterministic approaches to provide tailored, context-specific solutions. Ventura’s work exemplifies the bridging of science, policy, and practice.

Gaetano Martino emphasises the need for a comprehensive methodological and interpretative framework to address the institutional dimensions of rural development. He identifies a neo-institutional nexus between agricultural economics and rural sociology, positioning agriculture within a triangular relationship among territory, socio-technical systems, and farming styles. This perspective emphasises the local-specific nature of rural development and the varying responsibilities of central and peripheral policymakers.

Pierluigi Milone illustrates how the “make-or-buy” dilemma is often resolved through “nested markets” – hybrid forms of exchange such as on-farm dining, direct sales, and online marketplaces. These markets minimise transaction costs and reflect the empirical methodologies championed by Ventura. The theory of “nested markets” itself emerged from the fieldwork-intensive research approach that Ventura exemplified.

Sergio Schneider and Alexander Cenci investigate the “buy” aspect of market participation, posing critical questions about which markets best support family farms and the policies needed to facilitate them. Their case study of Rio Grande Do Sul, Brazil, demonstrates how local social contexts influence market arrangements, underscoring the collective action dimensions of market institutions.

Angelo Frascarelli provides a policy-oriented analysis of European Union rural development initiatives since 1999, emphasising the centrality of agriculture within multifunctional rural areas. He advocates a territorial, multisectoral policy approach that positions agriculture as a driver of environmental, socio-cultural, and economic value creation, fostering new revenue streams and employment opportunities.

Terry Marsden reflects on the concept of “poly-crises” to explore the integration of diverse challenges such as zero emissions, dietary shifts, food security, and regenerative practices. Using two British case studies, he argues for nuanced, context-specific transitions in agri-food systems rather than a linear shift toward agroecology. His analysis underscores the importance of power relations and socio-ecological settings in shaping these transitions, further highlighting the relevance of the neo-institutional framework.

This collection of papers underscores, on one side, the complexity of rural development and the imperative for interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners and, on the other, the vital importance of the pragmatic dimension of the rural development. The challenges ahead demand careful navigation, informed by both rigorous analysis and a pragmatic understanding of rural realities.

Flaminia Ventura was a researcher, a policymakers’ counsellor and, not least, a cowgirl. Let us honour her contributions by continuing the work she championed – bridging theory and practice to address the evolving challenges of rural development.