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Editorial

Bridging the gap between agricultural economics research and institutions: Essays in memory of Gerardo Delfino

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Studies on the territorial diversity of agriculture and rural areas have long been a core activity of the National Institute of Agricultural Economics (INEA), established in 1928. Until the early 1980s, INEA primarily focused on managing the Farm Accountancy Data Network (FADN) and publishing the annual report on Italian agriculture, *Annuario dell'Agricoltura Italiana*. After a period of crisis caused by budget constraints during the 1970s, it was only in the second half of the 1980s that INEA embarked on a new path, initiating research programmes that substantially diversified its scientific output.

Alongside this transformation, INEA invested in human capital – recruiting a new generation of agricultural economists, rural sociologists, and agronomists, motivated by the ambition to develop the autonomous capacity to design and interpret the evolving needs of the farming sector. Gerardo Delfino is at the heart of this evolution. From the very beginning, his vision and intellectual curiosity inspired this transformation. As a senior researcher and later Managing Director at INEA, Gerardo was not only a distinguished scholar but also a catalyst for institutional change. His intellectual curiosity and wide-ranging interests defy easy categorisation, making it impossible to confine his contribution to a single theme within agricultural economics. This forward-looking process continued over the following decades, culminating in the transformation of INEA into today's Council for Agricultural Research and Analysis of Agricultural Economics (CREA). This special issue is dedicated to honouring Gerardo Delfino's legacy of ideas, passion, and unwavering commitment that has shaped INEA and continues to resonate within the scientific community today.

One of the defining threads running through Delfino's work was his commitment to policy design grounded in evidence. He understood that sound decisions require solid foundations, and this conviction was reflected in his meticulous attention to data collection on the agricultural sector – most notably through the FADN system. Under his contribution, this tool was steadily refined, enabling a deeper understanding of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and related measures and ensuring their impact could be monitored across all regions.

Delfino was a tireless advocate for dialogue – an ongoing conversation between scientific research and the institutions shaping agricultural policy. He encouraged us, as researchers, to reach beyond the confines of academia, to engage with decision-makers, to understand the evolving needs of the sector, and to offer meaningful support through capacity-building. His vision of stakeholder engagement was broad and inclusive: not limited to public authorities, but extending to environmental organisations, producer groups, parks and protected areas, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Equally remarkable was his sensitivity to the challenges facing Mediterranean rural areas, particularly those most vulnerable to relentless depopulation and demographic decline. He promoted studies on the role of extension services – a cornerstone of INEA's programmes – emphasising the training and professional development of agricultural advisors, who serve as vital bridges between innovation and practice.

The articles included in this special issue address some of the most recurrent themes in Delfino's work as a research manager. The overarching focus of these articles is on sectoral and geographical disparities in rural areas and the role of European Union (EU) policies in addressing these challenges. While sharing this common concern, the contributions differ in their approaches to representing these disparities and in the types of policies they examine.

E. Erjavec, I. Rac, and D. Bertolozzi-Caredio examine the recent CAP reform introducing the CAP Strategic Plans (CSPs). Their analysis reveals that many CSPs resemble a collection of interventions with limited overall coherence. This study underscores persistent gaps in integrating scientific evidence, developing methodologies, fostering interdisciplinarity, and improving communication between researchers and policymakers. Extending this approach to other policies – such as the Cohesion Policy – in the post-2027 reform appears highly challenging unless lessons from the current experience are effectively addressed.

F. Mantino, G. De Fano, and G. Asaro examine factors limiting the participation of declining territories in EU-funded programmes (European Regional Development Fund [ERDF], European Social Fund [ESF], and European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development [EAFRD]). Their analysis shows that demographic characteristics and administrative efficiency are decisive in explaining disparities in fund absorption. The impact of these funds on reducing territorial gaps varies: positive for rural development policies, moderate for the regional fund, and highly controversial for the social fund. The Lisbon Treaty (Art. 174) broadens territorial

cohesion to include rural areas and territories with permanent natural or demographic disadvantages – such as sparsely populated regions, islands, cross-border areas, and mountains. The findings indicate that ERDF and EAFRD significantly support access to essential services and digital infrastructure. However, the study highlights a critical challenge: the limited and underexplored complementarity among Funds across rural areas, which calls for improved policy design.

Continuing the analysis of how policies have addressed territorial disparities, M.R. Pupo D'Andrea, F. Carillo, A. Scardera, and R. Henke show that, despite the redistributive efforts embedded in the CAP – particularly through the internal convergence mechanism – the income gap between the North and South Italian macro-regions has persisted and, in some cases, even widened. Farm-level data confirm that the CAP has not succeeded in reducing these territorial disparities, despite South Italy receiving relatively more support than North Italy in 2014 and especially in 2022. The authors conclude that this evidence does not call for additional financial support but rather for structural changes to close the gap in a permanent, more efficient way. From a policy design perspective, addressing geographical agricultural income disparities requires building synergies with other funds operating at the same territorial level.

Among these complementary instruments, a strong role should be assigned to policies that strengthen the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS), which has evolved significantly within the CAP over the last two decades. F. Giarè and A. Vagnozzi analyse the evolution and implementation of AKIS policies in addressing agricultural needs, with a focus on the Mezzogiorno. These policies have shifted from the traditional advisory and training tools of the 1990s to a holistic approach promoting networks, interactivity, co-innovation, and the adaptation of research to local contexts. Adoption, however, has been uneven and financially limited: AKIS resources represent less than 2.7% of regional allocations (1.5% in the Mezzogiorno), reflecting disparities in organisational models, institutional capacity for innovation, and the role of public and private service providers.

A. Cavallo, L. Mastronardi, G. Cannata, and L. Romagnoli investigate territorial disparities in environmental and socio-economic conditions, focusing on the fragility of mountain areas – defined as a multidimensional construct linked to exposure to hazards and the capacity to respond and recover. Their model confirms the interdependence between environmental and socio-economic fragilities, consistent with the literature. The results highlight marked heterogeneity across Italian mountain ecosystems: in many north-eastern municipal-

ities, demographic vitality and favourable environmental conditions create virtuous circles that sustain rural vibrancy. Conversely, in the central Apennines, demographic decline persists despite good environmental conditions, while in southern mountains, demographic and environmental weaknesses increasingly reinforce each other, forming a vicious circle.

The papers included in this special issue offer valuable insights for the forthcoming reform of EU policies for the 2028-2034 programming period. The proposals presented by the European Commission in July 2025 regarding the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028-2034 and the associated restructuring of the EU policy architecture can be interpreted in light of the research findings discussed herein. Readers will find relevant elements for reflection in the contributions' conclusions and policy implications, both in the domain of the European Cohesion Policy and the two pillars of the CAP.

The first three papers highlight key challenges that may arise from this new institutional governance framework, particularly the risk that the agricultural sector could experience reduced bargaining power within national contexts. This concern underscores the importance of ensuring that sectoral priorities are not overshadowed in the pursuit of greater integration and simplification.

Bridging scientific research with policy reform and implementation has always been a demanding challenge for those committed to applied research. It requires time, a long-term vision, multidisciplinary approaches, relational skills, and a constant effort to maintain dialogue with institutions. These elements are essential for refining our understanding of problems and opportunities, identifying the positions and bargaining power of different stakeholders, and assessing the feasibility of policy proposals.

There are no training programmes, university courses, or master's degrees that can fully impart these qualities; only concrete field experience can do so. During the years of Delfino's leadership and coordination, INEA was an extraordinary school for many of us. We all owe him that invaluable lesson – both policy-oriented and profoundly human. This heritage enabled our research centre, over time, to become a recognised reference point for national and regional institutions responsible for agricultural and rural policy. Delfino's vision and dedication have been instrumental in building a stronger scientific community and in forging a culture of dialogue and trust between research and policy. This culture continues to inspire us today.