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Research article

Strategies for sustainable rural development: insights from Local Action Groups in Campania's agri-food sector

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Abstract

Local development is closely interconnected with agri-food systems, which play a key role in strengthening the resilience of rural communities. Community-led local development represents a strategic approach to fostering balanced and sustainable rural development. This study analyses the local development strategies implemented by Local Action Groups (LAGs) in the Campania region (Italy), focusing on their thematic priorities and alignment with the sustainability objectives of the Common Agricultural Policy. A two-step methodology is applied: first, a descriptive analysis of the thematic areas selected by LAGs; second, content analysis based on topic modelling to identify the main underlying themes. The results show that most LAGs prioritise local food systems, rural districts, and agri-food value chains. Five dominant topics emerge: innovation, cooperation, economic growth, networking capacity, and a population-centred approach, highlighting their potential to address current agricultural challenges.

Keywords: Community-led local development, Agri-food systems, Rural resilience, Local action groups.
JEL codes: Q18, R58, O18.

Highlights:

- Local Action Groups in Campania prioritise agri-food systems and rural value chains in their development strategies.
- The focus of the strategies are five key topics: innovation, cooperation, economic growth, networking, and population-centred approaches.
- Community-led local development strategies show strong potential to enhance rural resilience and address current agricultural challenges.

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1. Introduction

Local rural development is a complex and multidimensional process that aims to improve quality of life in rural areas by promoting economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion of local community (Viccaro *et al.*, 2021). As reported in a European Union (EU) communication (COM(2021) 345 final), rural areas are home to 137 million people in the EU – nearly 30% of the population – and cover more than 80% of EU territory. Rural areas are sources of food, contribute to the conservation of global biodiversity, provide a wide range of natural and renewable resources, and are home to unique architectural and cultural heritages. Furthermore, these areas provide open spaces and natural landscapes that encourage the recreation of cultural traditions, local crafts, and traditional agricultural practices, contributing to the cultural diversity and a sense of belonging to local communities. Local community development is deeply connected with agri-food systems, which act as vital pillars for the resilience of rural communities (Mantino, Vanni, 2018).

The challenges related to policies for rural development are diverse and multifaceted, encompassing economic, environmental, social, and institutional dimensions. Examples include limited access to markets, low agricultural productivity, poverty and unemployment, climate change, lack of coordination and collaboration, social exclusion, and marginalisation.

Contemporary changes in global sociopolitical scenarios call for continuous and permanent development of rural areas for current and future generations. It is therefore essential to identify the key drivers of this development and take proactive measures to enhance productivity, environmental sustainability, and community engagement. These efforts can support sustainable growth and the innovative restoration of natural resources.

To support the sustainable development of rural areas, the EU has implemented several financial instruments designed to promote knowledge transfer and innovation in agriculture and forestry systems. These efforts aim to enhance the competitiveness of agricultural practices, encourage the adoption of innovative technologies, and advocate for sustainable forest management. These initiatives also facilitate the organisation of food chains, ensure animal welfare, and manage risks in agriculture while promoting resource efficiency and the transition towards a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy and preserving ecosystems.

Taking a systemic and multidisciplinary approach (Knickel *et al.*, 2019), effective implementation of tailored local development strategies requires the active involvement of communities, the preservation and celebration of heritage and culture, and the promotion of economic diversification through sustainable practices (Candeloro, Tartari, 2025). Community-led local development (CLLD) is a participatory approach to rural development that empowers local communities to take ownership of their development processes and shape their own futures. It promotes local community participation and collective action while seeking to build social cohesion, strengthen local institutions, and improve the resilience of rural communities in the face of economic, social, and environmental challenges. CLLD recognises that local communities possess valuable knowledge, resources, and social capital that can be leveraged to drive sustainable development outcomes.

Within CLLD, the LEADER programme plays a strategic role in promoting sustainable local development and fostering local partnerships. Evaluating the LEADER approach is quite complex for several reasons, including its multifaceted nature and the fact that the effectiveness of the implemented interventions depends on the behaviour of multiple actors (Papadopoulou *et al.*, 2011). Evaluating policy implementation systems is crucial to determining whether policies can achieve their objectives and generate positive impacts on society. Without an adequate implementation system, policies risk failing to realise their full potential for social and economic transformation.

Existing studies vary considerably in their approaches, and no universally accepted methodology for evaluating LEADER implementation has been established. This is reflected in the lack of universally applicable guidelines or methodological protocols for analysing and evaluating LEADER policies. Nevertheless, numerous studies have contributed to addressing this gap by proposing and examining different aspects of this policy. Existing research has investigated a range of issues related to the LEADER approach, including its practical implementation, its impact on rural development, the effectiveness of the measures adopted, and the challenges encountered during implementation (Rahoveanu Adrian, 2012; Fernandez Portillo *et al.*, 2019; Masot *et al.*, 2019; Permingeat, Vanneste, 2019; Ruszkai *et al.*, 2021; Chatzichristos, Perimenis, 2022).

These studies employ a variety of methodological approaches, ranging from qualitative to quantitative research. Some assess performance indicators, while others compare experiences at the national and international levels. Rami *et al.* (2021) identify challenges for local governments and rural communities, using a qualitative approach to highlight issues that may inform proactive

responses. Bumbalová *et al.* (2016) describe key success factors for the LEADER programme. They use these factors as a basis for designing interviews and focus groups to provide a broader understanding of the context in Slovakia. Shishkova (2020) analyses the main factors influencing the outcomes of integrated strategy implementation and uses econometric analysis to identify opportunities for increasing the number of supported initiatives and to formulate recommendations. Aleksandrova-Zlatanska (2019) conducts a descriptive analysis, using standard deviations and medians, to assess the impact of territorial approaches, particularly CLLD and LEADER, on the economic development of municipalities in Bulgaria. Thuessen, Nielsen (2014) examine the added value of the LEADER territorial governance approach in the context of multilevel governance of rural and coastal development, drawing on interviews and focus groups. Their findings suggest that the LEADER approach favours rural development. Tsacheva, Zheleva (2021) investigate participation in territorial development under the CLLD approach using statistical analysis. Their results indicate that most respondents are satisfied with CLLD implementation and have clear, concrete proposals for improving the approach.

In addition, some researchers have proposed specific conceptual frameworks or combinations of methodological approaches to assess the impact and effectiveness of the LEADER approach more comprehensively (Neumeier, 2017; Castro-Arce, Vanclay, 2020; Tsacheva, Zheleva, 2021; Finta, 2022; Deže *et al.*, 2023). One prominent approach in the analysis of LEADER is social innovation. According to Mulgan (2006, p. 146) '*social innovation refers to innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social*'.

Bosworth *et al.* (2016) examine CLLD initiatives in rural areas of Europe to develop a broader understanding of the scope of rural social innovation. Navarro-Valverde *et al.* (2022) analyse the different forms of social innovation emerging from specific projects in marginal rural areas facing depopulation. They highlight the role of Local Action Groups (LAGs) in overcoming resistance within local communities to participating in and supporting rural development projects, as well as the importance of creating collective learning processes. This multidimensional perspective can help account for the complexity and diversity of rural dynamics and identify best practices and lessons learned from various implementation experiences. Although a standardised methodology for evaluating the LEADER approach is lacking, scientific research has contributed significantly to outlining the challenges and opportunities related to this policy and to outlining methodological approaches and tools for its analysis and evaluation.

Against this background, this study aims to analyse the local development strategies implemented in the Campania region for the 2023-2027 programming period. It also examines their main topics and assesses their alignment within the sustainable development objectives of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for 2023-2027.

2. Method

2.1. Study area and context

The analysis focuses on the Campania region of Italy to examine its specific challenges and opportunities in the rural and agri-food sectors. Campania faces several challenges related to its rural economy, including natural resource management, the preservation of agricultural traditions, and the promotion of sustainable development.

The region's agricultural sector is characterised by considerable diversity in production systems. In the plains, agriculture includes modern farms and greenhouse cultivation. These farms use machinery and innovative farming techniques to improve productivity and sustainability. Precision farming methods support efficient resource management, including water conservation and soil health monitoring. Some greenhouses also employ hydroponic systems to optimise space and resource use while minimising environmental impact. In contrast, agriculture in other parts of the region faces constraints arising from the morphological characteristics of the terrain. These marginal areas often produce high-quality regional agricultural products, but their development is also constrained by geographical and rural development limits. At the same time, they offer unique opportunities for innovation and economic development. The coexistence of traditional agriculture and modern farming systems reflects the diversity of Campania's agricultural landscape.

Understanding the rural and agri-food context of Campania can therefore provide useful insights for the design of policies and strategies at the national and international levels. For the 2023-2027 CAP programming period, 15 LEADER areas have been identified in the Campania region (Figure 1)[1].

The LAGs operating in this region bring together diverse stakeholders. Their participation enables the formation of partnerships that combine expertise and resources to pursue shared development objectives. These groups are actively involved in developing strategies to promote sustainable growth and strengthen the region's socioeconomic fabric.

The implementation of complex community projects (CCPs) constitutes a central element of local development strategies. These projects envisage networks of actors willing to invest and collaborate to provide new services or improve ones for local communities. They are intended to foster innovation and facilitate the use of financial resources, while promoting public-private collaboration. Their main goal is to address gaps in service provision and improve residents' quality of life. A key feature of CCPs is the involvement of local communities in identifying the needs to be addressed and in defining and implementing projects.

Consistent with the participatory nature of CCPs, the strategy development process involved a broad range of local stakeholders representing the public sector, economic and social actors, and civil society organisations. In total, 723 stakeholders participated across the 15 LAGs examined. These included 259 representatives of public institutions, such as municipalities and other public bodies; 218 representatives of economic and social interests, including farmers, entrepreneurs, producer associations, and business organisations; and 246 representatives of civil society and organisations

[1]Executive Decree No. 150 of 29 March 2023. The Campania region approved the context analysis for the territorialisation of intervention SRG06 'Leader - Implementation of local development strategies' of the Rural Development Complement 2023-2027 (Campania region, 2023).

promoting cultural, environmental, and social interests. Stakeholders were involved throughout the entire strategy development process, from identifying local needs and challenges to defining priorities, co-designing actions, and validating the final strategies. Participation was facilitated through two public consultations, two thematic workshops, and three stakeholder meetings organised by the LAGs. These mechanisms supported the integration of local knowledge, territorial needs, and sector-specific perspectives into the design of the CCP strategies, contributing to a collaborative and bottom-up planning process.

Local development strategies are required to address a maximum of two thematic areas selected from the following six: ecosystem services, biodiversity, natural resources, and landscape; local food systems, districts, and agricultural and agri-food chains; services, goods, and collective and inclusive spaces; energy, bioeconomy, and circular economy communities; local sociocultural and tourism supply systems; and local craft and manufacturing production systems. Each LAG is required to develop at least one thematic area within its local development strategy.

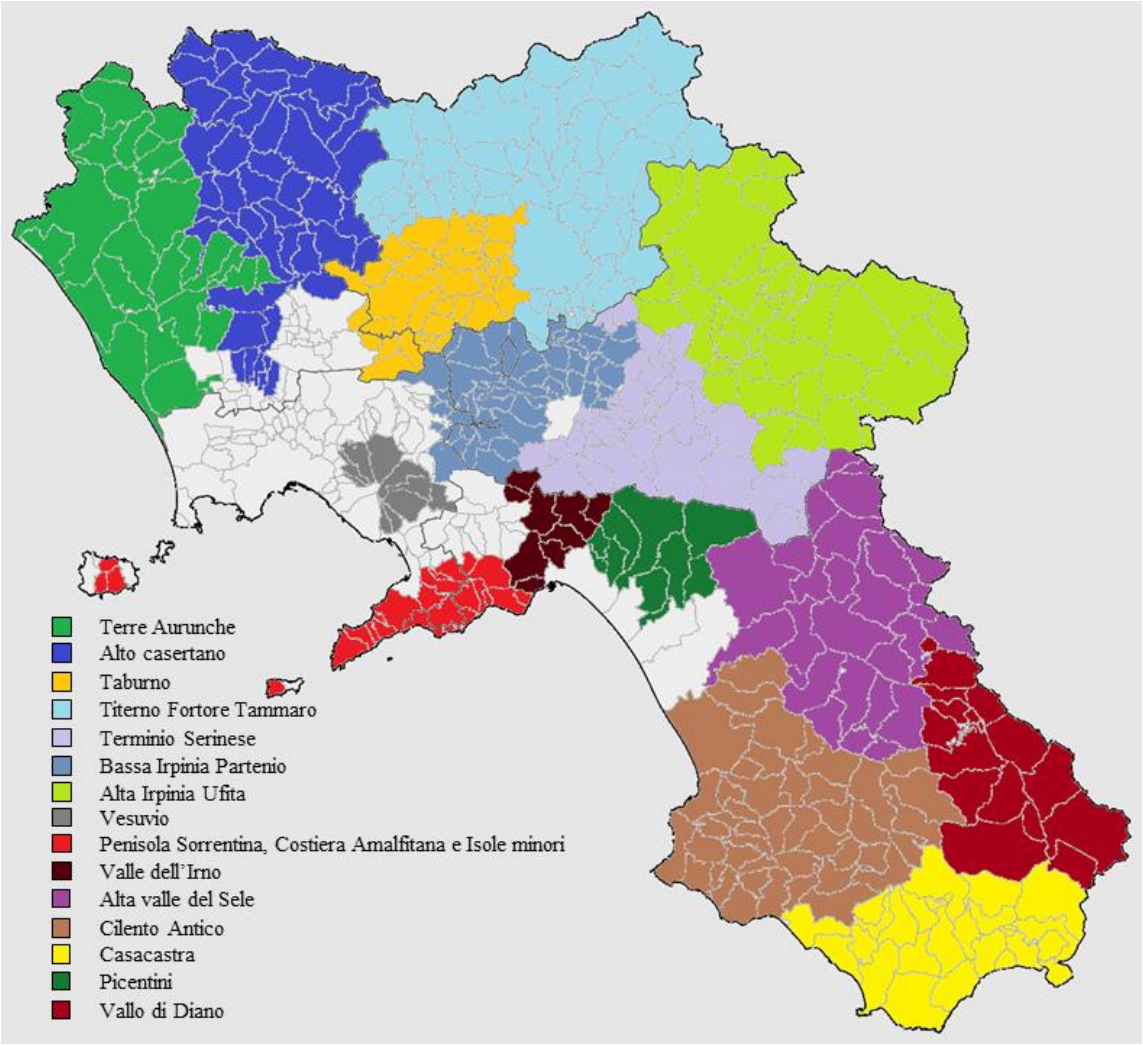


Figure 1. LAGs identified in the Campania region.
Source: Author's elaborations.

2.2. Analysis

To conduct the analysis, documents containing local development strategies were collected from the official website of the Department of Agriculture of the Campania region. In the preliminary stages, the thematic areas addressed by the projects were identified and described. The number of CCPs associated with each thematic area was then recorded. Subsequently, a topic extraction analysis was conducted on the territorial development strategies formulated by the LAGs, using Wordstat software.

The main topics were extracted using non-negative matrix factorisation. The software settings for this extraction included the segmentation option, a loading threshold of 0.20, topic enrichment, a high default confidence level, and Normalized Pointwise Mutual Information (NPMI) as the topic coherence measure. NPMI is a statistical measure used in natural language processing and information retrieval to quantify the association between pairs of words within a given text. It is derived from Pointwise Mutual Information (PMI), which measures the extent to which two words co-occur in a corpus more frequently than would be expected based on their independent occurrences. In text analysis, NPMI is often used to measure the semantic relatedness or coherence between words or phrases within a document or corpus. NPMI ranges from 0 to 1. Higher scores generally indicate stronger associations between word pairs and, potentially, greater thematic coherence.

3. Results

The number of CCPs associated with each thematic area is presented in Figure 2. In total, the regional LAGS proposed 40 CCPs.

The most frequently selected thematic area for developing strategies was local food systems, districts, and agricultural and agri-food chains, which was addressed by 18 CCPs. Two thematic areas were each selected by six CCPs: services, goods, and collective and inclusive spaces; and local sociocultural and tourism supply systems. Two thematic areas were selected by three CCPs: energy, bioeconomy, and circular economy communities; and local craft and manufacturing production systems. Finally, the thematic area covering ecosystem services, biodiversity, natural resources, and landscape was selected by four CCPs.

The analysis of the main concepts and topics identified in the LAGs' local development strategies provides insights into the priorities shaping territorial development in the areas examined. Table 1 presents the coherence scores, measured using NPMI, associated with the five main topics: innovation (0.77), cooperation (0.44), economic growth (0.37), network creation (0.34), and initiatives prioritising the population (0.29).

A further analysis of local development strategies identified three main regional areas characterised by shared needs. The strategies developed by the LAGs in these areas reflect the thematic patterns identified through the topic extraction analysis. In the northern part of the region, strategies emphasise economic growth through the enhancement and promotion of local territories. In the inland and southern areas, the focus is on revitalising local communities through initiatives that encourage cooperation and networking among local stakeholders. In contrast, coastal areas prioritise innovation in the local agri-food sector (Figure 3).

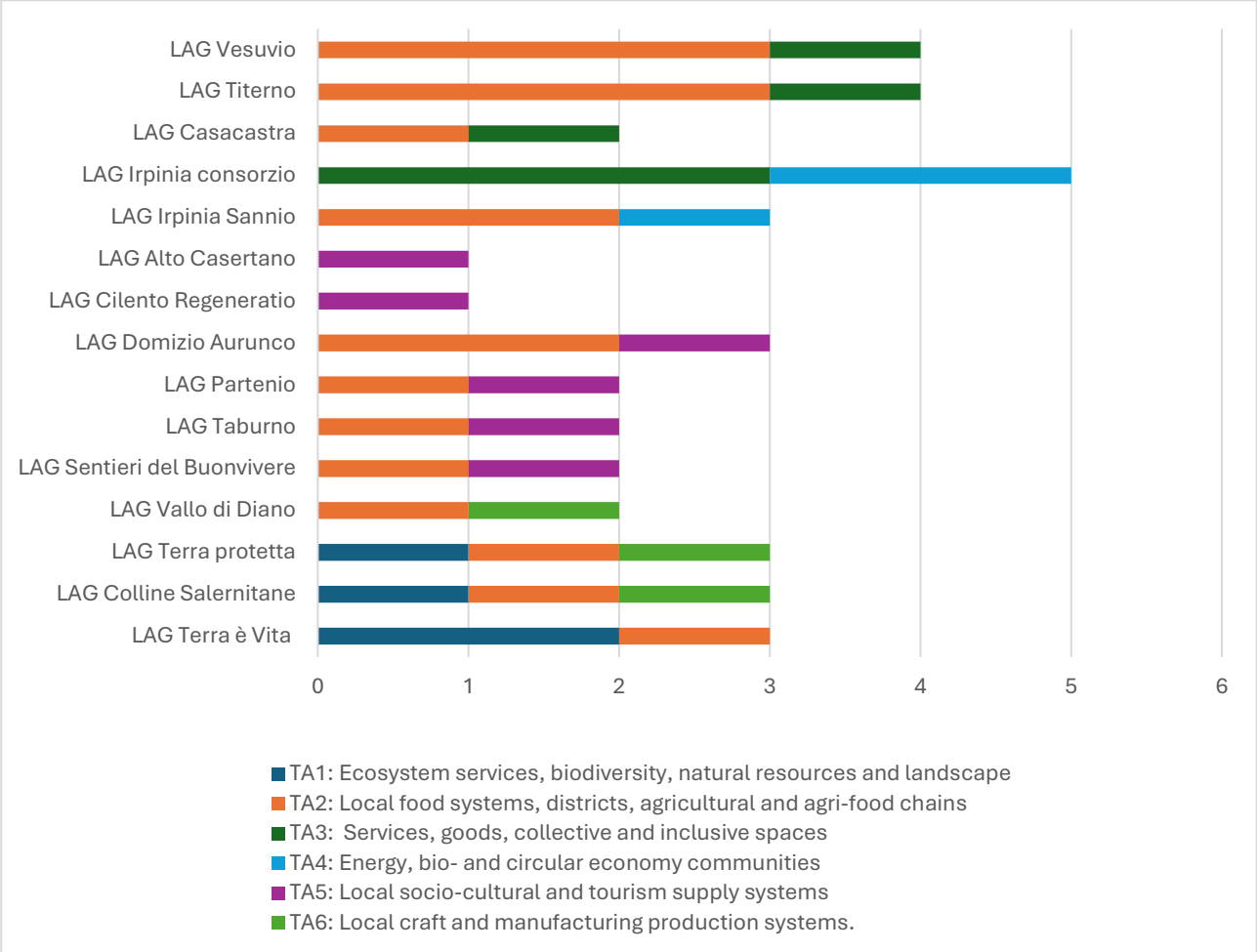


Figure 2. Number of CCPs and thematic areas for each LAG examined in the Campania region.
Source. Authors' elaboration

Table 1. Main topics of LAG strategies in the Campania region.

Topic	**Coherence (NPMI)**
Innovation	0.77
Cooperation	0.44
Economic growth	0.37
Network creation	0.34
Population centred	0.29

Source. Authors' elaboration

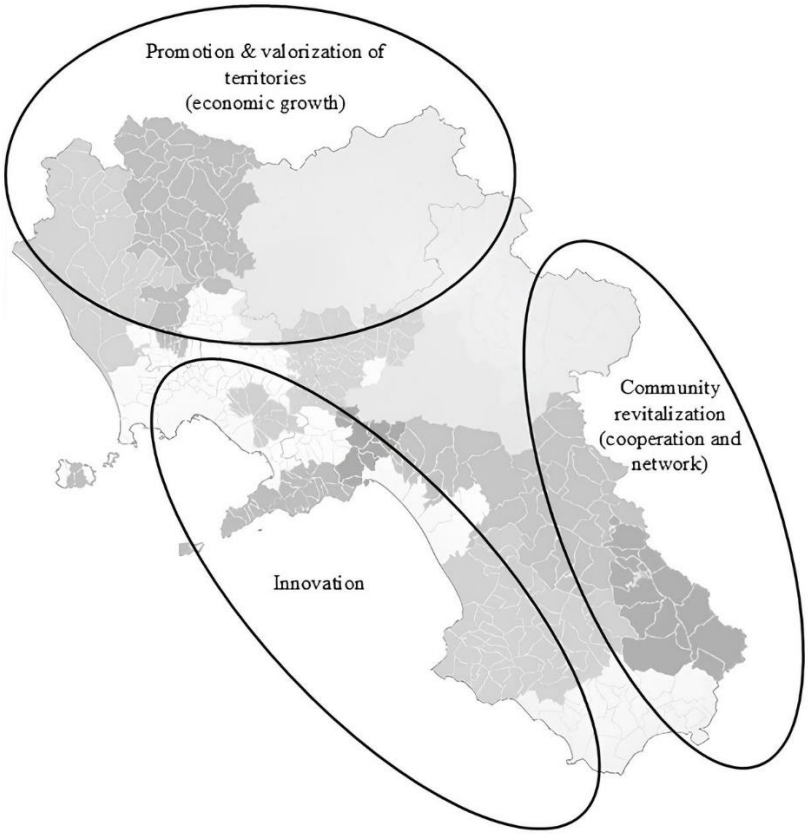


Figure 3. Regional areas with common strategic topics.
Source. Authors' elaboration

4. Discussion and conclusions

This study analysed the local development strategies adopted in the Campania region of Italy for the CAP 2023-2027 programming period. The findings provide insights that may inform future policy actions and help enhance the potential of rural areas.

Among the selected thematic areas, particular emphasis is placed on local food systems, districts, and agricultural and agri-food chains. This emphasis highlights the need for food self-sufficiency. The results also suggest an interest in ensuring the availability of, access to, and utilisation of safe, nutritious, and sufficient food to meet people's dietary needs sustainably over time. These issues are particularly relevant in the context of current geopolitical instability, armed conflicts, the aftermath of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, and the increasing frequency of adverse climatic events. These challenges require more sustainable and regenerative practices in agriculture and related sectors.

Other frequently selected thematic areas concern collective and inclusive goods, services, and spaces, as well as local sociocultural and tourism systems. Improving access to essential services – including healthcare, education, transportation, and digital connectivity – can make rural areas more

liveable and attractive (Hodge *et al.*, 2017; Vitale Brovarone, Cotella, 2020; Zhang, 2022). Better access to services can improve residents' quality of life, help counteract depopulation, and create new economic opportunities – for example, by encouraging remote work and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, developing systems that promote cultural and natural heritage can attracts tourists and stimulate local economies. Rural tourism, particularly when based on authentic and sustainable experiences, can generate additional income, encourage the development of accommodation and catering facilities, and promote local products and traditions, thereby enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of rural areas (Yang *et al.*, 2021). Together, these elements may create a virtuous cycle in which economic development, cultural heritage, and community well-being reinforce one another, strengthening the resilience of rural areas.

The analysis of the main topics identified innovation as the most prominent theme, highlighting its potential role in agricultural development. Innovation can support the adoption of more sustainable and adaptable practices that respond effectively to changing environmental conditions and market dynamics. Wang *et al.* (2023) similarly emphasise the importance of innovation in agricultural practices for strengthening the economic resilience and prosperity of rural areas. Furthermore, fostering collaboration among different stakeholders can reinforce territorial identity (Ferretti *et al.*, 2022).

Cooperation is the second main topic. Cooperative initiatives enable farmers and communities to pool resources, share knowledge, and address common challenges (Futemma *et al.*, 2020). Collaborative land management can also contribute to biodiversity conservation, the protection of natural resources, and the preservation of the aesthetic value of agricultural areas.

The third topic concerns rural economic growth. This is closely linked to the development of resilient agricultural systems, strategic planning, and effective networks. Efficient agricultural systems can contribute to economic growth, while well-defined agricultural strategies can help establish the conditions for sustainable economic growth. Inclusive growth strategies can benefit smallholder farmers and marginalised communities by promoting a more equitable distribution of the benefits of economic development.

The fourth topic identified in the analysis is network creation. Networks can strengthen connections among different sectors, particularly those related to food production, landscape management, and cultural preservation. By facilitating collaboration among stakeholders, these networks can support innovative projects and approaches that benefit both local communities and their territories (Journeault *et al.*, 2021). As with cooperation more broadly, networks facilitate the sharing of resources, information, and best practices. They may also contribute to food security by ensuring more reliable supplies of fresh, local products. Collaborative initiatives, such as farm tours and local festivals, can attract tourists and generate additional income for farmers and local businesses.

The final topic highlighted by the analysis is a population-centred approach, which is important for promoting sustainable development in rural areas, particularly in agriculture and local economies. By prioritising the needs and contributions of local communities, especially farmers, it can foster inclusion and improve overall well-being. Training and educational opportunities for farmers and other community members can further strengthen local skills and knowledge. A population-centred approach can therefore support rural development by empowering communities, strengthening local networks, and promoting more inclusive and resilient rural economies.

This study contributes to the literature on rural development and CLLD from both methodological and empirical perspectives. First, it applies a text analysis approach based on topic modelling to examine LAGs' strategies, offering a novel and potentially scalable method for analysing LEADER/CLLD initiatives. Second, it provides one of the first comprehensive assessments of all LAGs within a single Italian region, moving beyond individual case studies and offering a broader territorial perspective on local development dynamics. Third, it examines the relationship between local strategic priorities and the sustainability objectives of the CAP, contributing to discussions on the alignment of local development strategies with EU rural development policy. Finally, by identifying latent dimensions such as networking capacity and population-centred development, this study offers new insights into how local actors formulate development strategies and how these priorities may contribute to rural resilience and adaptive capacity.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that local development strategies in Campania encompass several interconnected priorities, including community participation, the promotion of traditional products, sustainable development, innovation, experiential tourism, and local craftsmanship. The analysis also highlights the prominence of innovation in the strategies examined, although the extent to which this translates into technological innovation or measurable economic and social benefits requires further investigation.

These priorities suggest an approach to rural development that seeks to address immediate challenges related to food security and environmental sustainability while preparing rural communities for climate change and structural transformations in the agricultural sector. This approach is consistent with the concept of the 'twin transition', discussed by Brunori (2022), which emphasises the simultaneous pursuit of economic and environmental sustainability.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations, particularly its focus on a single geographical region. Although this regional focus enables a detailed examination of the local context, the findings may not be directly transferable to areas with different socioeconomic, cultural, or environmental characteristics. Future research could improve the generalisability of the findings through comparative studies across multiple regions and repeated analyses over time to assess the stability of the results.

Finally, in rural contexts such as Campania, this type of analysis may help identify opportunities to enhance the value of agri-food products and encourage the participation of local communities and external stakeholders in the local development processes. Such participation can support the preservation and promotion of regional cultures and traditions through agriculture and food production.

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization, T.D.G.; F.G.; C.M.; Methodology, T.D.G.; G.O.; Software, G.O.; Data curation, I.P.B; Writing - Original Draft, G.O; Writing - Review & Editing, T.D.G., F.G., C.M., I.P.B.; Supervision, F.G. and T.D.G.

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