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**SO.23 Location specificity in the performances of rural territories -
AIEAA contributed session -**

Macrotema B

Aula 11-EUR - Mercoledì 19 settembre 08.30-10.30

Organizzata da Pagliacci F.

*ASSESSING THE CONTRIBUTION OF AGRI-ENVIRONMENTAL SCHEMES ON IMPROVING HIGH
NATURE VALUE FARMING SYSTEM. A CASE STUDY IN ITALY*

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*EVALUATION OF SOCIAL INNOVATION IN MARGINALISED RURAL AREAS: POTENTIAL,
CHALLENGES AND A METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL BASED ON ITALIAN CASE STUDIES*

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*PRODUCTION STRATEGY AND REGIONAL DIFFERENTIATION: THE CASE OF THE EU
GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION SCHEMES IN ITALY*

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*WINE ROUTES AND TERRITORIAL ORGANISATION WITHIN LOCAL TOURIST SUPPLY: CASE STUDIES
OF TWO ITALIAN REGIONS*

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Evaluation of social innovation in marginalised rural areas: potential, challenges and a methodological proposal based on Italian case studies.

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Social innovation is an emerging topic, identified in the EU Strategy 2020 as one of the crucial, intangible factors required to promote smart, inclusive and sustainable growth. It provides society with a renovated role by considering it – in a time of major public budgetary constraints - an effective way of responding to social challenges through the mobilisation of people’s creativity, the promotion of an innovative and learning society and the creation of the social dynamics behind technological innovations (BEPA, 2011: 7). Although it initially focused on addressing social disadvantage and exclusion in a wide range of contexts, urban more often than rural, an unambiguous definition of social innovation has not been agreed on yet (Moulaert et al. 2005; MacCallum et al. 2009). Likewise, so far only a few scholars have proposed how to interpret the concept in the rural arena (e.g. Neumeier, 2012; Bosworth et al. 2016; Bock et al. 2016). A recent proposed definition of social innovation in relation to rural areas with specific limitations in terms of geographical location and/or socio-economic conditions, comes from a 4-year research project named SIMRA (Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas) and funded under the EU Horizon2020 Programme. Such proposed definition by Polman et al. (2017) states that social innovation is “the reconfiguring of social practices, in response to societal challenges, which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal well-being and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors”. To date, a catalogue of more than 50 examples of social innovation that have been identified according to this definition, in the sectors of agriculture, forestry and rural development in marginalised rural areas in EU and extra-EU Mediterranean countries (Bryce et al. 2017), has been compiled and published online. The catalogue is neither fix nor comprehensive, rather it provides an initial overview on how large the variety of social innovation cases already implemented can be. On the one hand, social innovation is probably more widespread than reported by scientific literature and perceived by practitioners today. This may be because the concept refers de facto to a wide range of initiatives dealing with different societal challenges: from the new social uses of agricultural and forestry activities (e.g., social horticulture or social farming, nursery services in forests, forest therapy), to the creation of new networks based on public-private partnerships for the production, transformation and commercialisation of new agricultural products and services, to the involvement of migrants and refugees in the management of peri-urban green areas, to several others. On the other hand, our knowledge and understanding of social innovation and related socio-economic dynamics remains very limited. It has been already stated that a commonly accepted definition and theoretical conceptualisation are under construction. Besides, specific policy instruments are still lacking, and a method to comprehensively evaluate social innovation in terms of its effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and impacts on society, economy, environment and institutions is also not available yet. According to the SIMRA project proposal, key elements of social innovation to be evaluated are: the “trigger”; the “perceived context”; the “agency/actors” acting for change; the “reconfiguring” process of social practices (included networks, governance arrangements and attitudes); the “reconfigured” new situation that brings about a social innovation project; the “activities”, “outputs” and “outcomes/impacts” of the social innovation project; the feedback loops interpreted as “learning processes”. Information on these complex and multifaceted aspects can be collected at the local level by means of semi-structured and structured interviews and participatory-based events (focus groups). Both quantitative and qualitative approaches and instruments are hence combined, and this is applicable for data collection as well as for the analysis of results and reporting of findings. Accordingly, the data can then be analysed and interpreted through indicators and other advanced instruments like the Social Network Analysis. Our proposed SIMRA evaluation method is currently being tested in 10 different case studies in various EU and extra-EU Mediterranean countries. Preliminary results in terms of calculated indicators for social innovation elements are expected by January 2019. Given the current stage of

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the study within SIMRA, this contribution intends to stimulate the scientific discourse and the debate between the world of science and that of the stakeholders. It does this by providing ideas and opportunity for discussion, alongside possible practical solutions for an evaluation approach and a specific evaluation framework for the capturing of the multifaceted aspects of social innovation. The latter two will be explained by directly applying them to a few/three selected Italian examples that most probably will be chosen among “Cooperativa Cadore”, with its SIMBlorti project (Belluno); the national network “Montagnaterapia”, with its activities with disabled people; “Cooperativa di Comunità Briganti del Cerreto” (Reggio Emilia), with its multiple services to slow and rural tourism; “Rural Hub” (Frosinone), with its activity of migrants’ inclusion. Despite the various methodological challenges and the high diversification and complexity of the topics to be evaluated (social innovation’s process, project and impacts), we believe that our scheme paves the way for building an innovative set of methods that considers “social factors” important role in EU’s future ‘Rural Development Programs’ and ‘Agricultural research and Innovation Agenda’.