

# Nested markets in marginal areas: Weak prosumers and strong food chains

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to test the importance of nested markets in Italy. The concept of nested markets, born in agricultural settings, has been expanded to other sectors and to urban areas. It is focused on two aspects of rural development literature: the prominence of exchanges of resources and services on their ownership/availability, and the emergence of new forms of spatialised intermediations versus the simple idea of globalised and digital dis-intermediation. The concept is applied to seven Italian cases that were presented in a conference and then published in the journal 'Culture della sostenibilità'. It is a secondary analysis of a purposive small sample. A general statistical analysis is not possible due to the great variety and informality of exchanges. Two weaknesses however are quite common on analysed cases: vertical organisation of exchanges (filieri) prevails on territorial integrated organisation (district), and consumers are weakly involved. The ideal of nested markets driven by prosumers or a consumption movement results feebler than expected.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2006, in Italy, a community of practice began to take shape around the theme of fragile rural areas. Annual conferences, to which researchers, activists, farmers, and public administrators brought their own experience in the field, had as their guiding element the search for specific 'resources' to strengthen or rehabilitate areas affected by different forms of marginality (Carrosio and Osti, 2017). First, human resources, that were dispersed by migration to cities or foreign countries, from almost all Italian rural areas for over a century, then, material resources (water management, energy and food production, and the reproduction and conservation of biodiversity) have been both the focus of specific investigations, with the identification of many virtuous cases (Osti, 2016). The condition of marginality is also determined by the loss of intangible resources such as knowledge, skills and art (Battaglia et al., 2015). Our hypothesis is that these resources must be rediscovered locally (endogenous development) or imported through a powerful territorial marketing action, which also involves immigrants from developing countries. All these insights have put a model of 'development based on resources and places' at the centre of our attention (Bridger and Alter, 2008).

In Italy, the category of place (or territory) is seen as a source of rural redemption (Dematteis and Magnaghi, 2018), but the claim for 'territory' is common to all rural Europe (Stead, 2014). The resource and place based approach is complementary to one centred on 'relationships' (Bonazzi, 2003). In fact, it is not enough to have excellent resources and capabilities on site if these are then unknown, sold off or delegitimised. At the basis of their capacity to produce integrated

development, rural areas need external recognition, on a wider scale, from even distant places. The theory of *dependencia* has formalised this issue for a long time, albeit in a negative key, as the expropriation of the resources of the periphery by centres (Blaney, 1996). The centre-periphery model is an example of the conjugation of relational and spatial elements. It can be an excellent starting point for setting up *nested markets* in fragile areas, leveraging a systematic and undue withdrawal of weak areas resources by strong areas.

The aim of the paper is to illustrate the capacity of nested markets in order to identify a more complete approach to marginal rural areas compared to the centre-periphery framework, respecting, however, its assumption that a crucial aspect is the combination of places and relationships. After an illustration of the cornerstones of nested markets, seven Italian cases specifically based on this approach will be considered in a secondary analysis.

## 2. Nested markets: a new approach to rural development

Discussing the limits and insights of dependency theory becomes an opportunity to search for a more complete model of analysis (Bond, 2017; Bull and Bøås, 2012). Such a theory has evolved towards political economy (Morgan, 1987; Bienefeld, 1988), and more recently to extractivism (Burchardt and Dietz, 2014); even place based approach to development has intellectual debts with *dependencia* (Barca et al., 2012). Despite this evolution the basic concepts of dependency theory do not adequately address, or underestimate, at least three issues that are central to facing the problem of the development of rural fragile areas. 1) The peripheries are not all the same (Leimgruber and Chang,

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2019). In some cases the internal resources of relatively weak areas are such as to profoundly change the expropriation relationship. The Dolomite valleys are an example, characterised by an extraordinary internal cohesion and by a unique environmental heritage, which allows them to stand independently on the tourist market. 2) Democratic countries and some important international organisations have taken territorial rebalancing measures with significant financial and organisational flows; these measures, however, also create advantageous local positions. Think of the redistributive effects of European cohesion policies, and also the distributional effects of these same policies when they are tailored for to specific places (Servillo et al., 2016). 3) Populations in peripheral areas also have negotiation and cultural skills. We could also define them as relational charismas - which can greatly alter the expropriation process. A skilled political leader, a united ethnic minority, a local literature taken up and updated by the mass media, a motivated local bureaucracy can change the terms of the exchange between the single fragile locality and the centres of industrial, financial and administrative power (Grivins and Tisenkopfs, 2018).

We have thus focused on the question that should guide the nested markets analysis: the *terms of the exchange*.<sup>1</sup> These terms vary both in the spatial form and in the mode of their relationship. The centre-periphery scheme instead conceives a single spatial form - generally a circle with a centre and different sections of the same, Galtung (1971) called it a feudal model - and only one type of relationship, that of the expropriation of commercial and cultural values. Certainly, it is not enough to correct this type of analysis by saying that the world is multipolar and characterised by a relative autonomy of politics with respect to the economy (Evans, 1989). More specific economic-spatial models are needed. It is precisely those models that the critique of neoliberalism tends to underestimate by imagining a single propulsive force (capitalism) that expands, finding, if anything, some marginal 'resistance' (Goodman, 2010; Bovone and Lunghi, 2017).

In such a system, small happy islands are tolerated or used to demonstrate a false pluralism of economic forms or, in any case, the will of the capitalist regime to present itself with an acceptable face: it is therefore green and social washing. Some productions, some locations, and some community regimes are useful for embellishing a despotic system, provided they remain on an infinitesimal scale and of symbolic importance (Wilkinson, 2010).

A representation that can counter the monolithic critique of neoliberalism is represented by the so-called nested markets. This is a just sketched theory, born in agriculture field, but with some analytical and heuristic values suitable for explaining the dynamics of fragile areas. In fact, this approach considers both spaces and economic relations at the same time.<sup>2</sup> It is very similar to the concept of *embeddedness* coined by

<sup>1</sup>The *dependencia* literature use 'terms of trade' according to the Prebisch-Singer thesis (Singer, 1999). Political economy speaks of 'modes of exchange' which concerns both the balance of power between contractors and the infrastructure of exchange (Lie, 2016). In our case the 'terms' or 'exchange' modes (in the plural) add the socio-spatial form of the exchange, but even more the idea that the exchange is relatively emancipating, also in conditions of power imbalance. In this sense, studies of the meaning and use of money show that it is a tool that allows relationships overriding the status of the contracting parties to a large extent (Biggeri et al., 2015; Evangelisti, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>Analytically, nested markets are a combination of economic relationships and the places in which they occur. Another important feature is the sedimentation of relationships and places for which some methods of exchange are fixed in routines, practices, rules, and physical structures that are perpetuated over time. This happens for any social phenomenon. The originality of this approach lies in three elements: 1) there is no single market for goods and labour, but several that are partially communicating with each other; 2) places of exchange and relationships are not dominated by a pure rational logic, but are affected by socio-spatial fixation mechanisms; 3) nested markets are not necessarily more virtuous, but contain their "moral", that is a noble justification of the reasons for their functioning. The model is similar to theory of "conventions" (Centemeri, 2001, p.2).

the economic sociologist Granovetter, 50 years ago. Even the idea of the *market as an institution* and not as a pure exchange between rational actors has strong affinities with nested markets (Bagnasco, 1988). The advantage of nested markets with respect to these important socio-political theories is precisely the fact of being born from a relatively weak context such as the primary sector that has for decades been assumed to be a symbol of marginality.

We can use this approach to evaluate the *terms of the exchange* of a set of primary resources that are abundant and not valued precisely in rural fragile areas. In addition to this genetic advantage, the young theory of nested markets envisages a plurality of markets and at the same time their relative interaction. Classic examples are the development of multifunctional farms, assuming even social tasks such as so-called 'green care'. For social farming as for agriculture in general, we could highlight the institutional aspects, that is being *fundamental economies* strongly intertwined with public intervention and necessary for the survival of societies (Barbera et al., 2016). In these economies the classical market exchange could be a minority, because the public supply or natural monopolies, as are the network services provided by utilities, prevail.

Nevertheless, these are still trades in which the counterparts have a degree of freedom to shape the situation. In fact there are a multiplicity of exchange forms, both in the spatial sense (the areas where the exchange materially takes place), and in the plastic sense, that is the body's glosses in the act of exchanging an asset (Goffman, 1959). They are *exchange practices*, because both the actions and the domains are considered within them. In 'nested' markets, in addition to pluralism, physicality and setting, we see chances of *emancipating exchange*. This last element makes it possible to emphasise the fact that each of us has something valuable to give/sell and this produces dignity, meaning relative balance between the parties (see Fraser, 2013, p. 233). Evidently, it depends greatly on how that 'something' is conceived, evaluated and ultimately appreciated.

Economic exchange not only has an emancipating value at the individual level; there is also a collective dimension (the enterprise) and a territorial dimension (the area from which that good comes). A macroscopic example is *Made in Italy*. If an exchange incorporates values beyond the pure quality/price ratio of the asset, it acts as a sense making system and almost certainly produces positive effects on fields that are not strictly commercial, such as education and health. Fair trade, which ideally works in this way, is a nested market. Nevertheless, 'nested' is not always synonymous with good exchange. The analytics of nested markets allow avoiding normative or idealistic drifts. Some seasonal labour markets in agriculture are a deeply rooted combination of places and relationships, but they have little virtuous (Corrado and D'Agostino, 2018).

The agri-food chain will be the central element of our analysis of rural economies; but not the only one. There are many integrations between food production and other sectors such as tourism and green care. We must not neglect forestry, mining activities and the small economy that develops around protected natural areas. Finally, an important chapter concerns the use of water in all its meanings, including the use of vast rural areas for wastewater treatment and sludge disposal. These are also 'ecological' services whose payment is subject to rules that are not exactly fair. The analytics of the nested markets will therefore have to be extended to labour relationships and ecosystem services.

Nested markets, in addition to their agricultural genesis, have two other features: 1) the multifunctional nature of the firms, in particular in territories that are rarefied from an industrial and demographic point of view; and 2) the hybrid character of the relationships that do not correspond to either the pure type of the exchange of equivalents (market) or to the hierarchy (Polman et al., 2010).

As is known, 'hybrid' can be a residual category, a way to escape a more stringent conceptualisation. Hybrid has been a label used to identify the *third sector*. Some scholars, such as Donati (2010), have

insisted on the existence of a strong distinction for non-profit organisations, generally due to the idea of *reciprocity*. It clearly connotes the nested markets, in which the exchange of goods and services is not reduced to the single sale, but triggers long, viscous relations, related to collateral aspects, marked by the constraint of maintaining the triadic donation sequence of [Mauss \(2002\)](#). The hybrid is a business relationship that intersects with other motivations and purposes that go beyond the pure functionality of the exchange. Reciprocity consists of leaving open the hierarchy of values that preside over the exchange. The instrumental targets for exchanges are mixed with moral, aesthetic and social motivations.

In the literature on the nested markets these elements are hardly sketched,<sup>3</sup> despite Van der Ploeg et al. saying “while mainstream markets tend to obfuscate the structures in which they are embedded, the newly emerging nested markets are grounded on the explicit recognition of their embedding” ([Ploeg et al., 2012](#), p. 140). These authors highlight three aspects of nested markets: the specificity of places, the infrastructure for exchanges and the production of commons.

*Specificity or distinctiveness* does not mean, according to [Polman et al., 2010](#), closure compared to the wider market; a nested market can be enclosed in another. Distinctiveness - basically a cognitive factor - produces recognition, a term used to indicate the explicit act of assigning value to something. We want to bring to light the assumptions that the global market tends to hide, in these new markets. “They are not anonymous markets. Rather, they are markets with a particular focus (sometimes underpinned by a specific brand, or a specific quality definition, or by relations of solidarity, or specific policy objectives” ([Ploeg et al., 2012](#) p. 139).

The socio-material infrastructure is *the set of specific artefacts* and the specific way in which these artefacts are tied together into a coherent and smoothly functioning whole” ([Ploeg et al., 2012](#), p. 157). This second aspect is reminiscent, for example, of an electronic platform that allows purchases over long distances, to highlight two things: a) linking structures are also included in norms and institutions, in other words, embedded, and b) new intermediaries emerge. As the rhetoric of alternative groups insists on short supply chains, disintermediation, and the reduction of transaction costs, we are witnessing an affirmation of new mediators. Typically, most rural development projects have gone from the mediation of farming organisations to new agencies formed by human and social sciences professionals.

The third aspect concerns *common pool resources*. Scholars of the nested markets make explicit reference to the theory of Elinor Ostrom. In fact, a typical food product that is recognised on the market as healthy and good, is a commons, or an intangible asset (fame), which is accessible to all and requires the contribution of all for its maintenance. The same can be said about the landscape or water or trust. If everyone respects certain rules of land and water use, the whole area benefits from it. However, the common pool resources are not in themselves the objects that are exchanged in the nested markets, but concomitant factors – pre-conditions or side effects - that increase their value and allow the exchange to be more equitable and sustainable.

Given these characteristics, the next step is to find indicators of the presence of nested markets in fragile areas. These are generally brands of a product/service that explicitly exalts virtuous aspects such as healthiness, the conservation of natural resources, respect for workers' rights, and the enhancement of minority cultures. Another qualifying

<sup>3</sup> Some critical elements of the nested market theory: little attention is paid to long supply chains, which also concern many fair trade products; there are doubts about the relationship between distinctiveness and social ties that is, anonymous places are alienating while those that show specific identities necessarily produce sympathy and ties. For responding to these critical elements, van der [Ploeg \(2016\)](#) suggests that nested markets are able to close Burt's structural holes created by global markets, thus enjoying a privileged position (*tertium gaudens*).

aspect is the name of the place of origin and consumption. Generally, we look at the first (origin) but the second is also positive effect. For example, it is striking that clothes packed in cooperatives that oppose organised crime in south Italy can have their own outlet in stores located in the centre of Milan, a global city of north. A third set of indicators concern the impact and durability of exchanges: the number and turnover of employees enrolled in the circuit. Elements such as social capital, happiness, the sense of well-being of producers, intermediaries and consumers should also be considered.

Finally, two corollaries of nested markets framework: one is the issue of exclusivity that concerns the places of origin of a product, and those who participate in the supply chain from the producer to the seller and the final customers. The quarrel about exclusivity is well known: purists say that a certain commercial good must be produced only in a certain area, sold by exclusive stores, purchased regularly by customers who use it prevalently if not exclusively (see [Wheeler, 2012](#)).

The second corollary concern self-provisioning, that is the capacity to use within the farm or the household self-produced goods. For example, according to the nested markets authors, in the animal farming “self-provisioning of feed and fodder is central and the animal's growth rhythm is slow” ([Ploeg et al., 2012](#), p. 149); in general “self-provisioning becomes a major feature and can be reinforced by local networking” ([Ploeg et al., 2012](#), p. 135). In this literature it is weaker the reference to consumer self-production, called also prosumer. The reason is that attention is paid mainly to production side, for which the combination of self-consumption and selling into the market is a crucial issue. Unlikely, for consumption side self-provision can be a hobby or a matter of lifestyle.

### 3. Some data on nested markets

It is hard to say how nested markets weight in the society. Usually, they are variable size segments of more general markets. We can therefore expect transfers from one market to another or dissolutions in the large-scale retail system. According to some estimates, this kind of markets represents around 10% of the entire agricultural sector of the most developed areas of the world ([Ploeg et al., 2012](#), p. 143). This is a very general and dated assessment, referring to year 2000. We can hypothesise that since 2000 the markets have been further segmented and consumer awareness has also grown ([Corsi and Novelli, 2018](#)).

A market segment for which quantification is possible is *fair trade*. Figures for 2015 speak of almost 100 million euros in Italy for the Fair Trade circuit, which has 145 partner companies, 700 items of different products and is present in over five thousand points of sale.<sup>4</sup> In comparison, it should be noted that the smallest of the eight large scale retailers operating in Italy (Pam Group) had a turnover in the same year of over 2.3 billion euro and the largest (Coop) makes around 10.8 billion euro.<sup>5</sup> The Fairtrade circuit, which also sells to large-scale retailers, has a turnover lower than that of ethnic food, which is another large nested market, and also strongly growing.<sup>6</sup>

The organic circuit is broader if one considers that only the EcorNaturasi group, the largest intermediary in the sector in Italy, had a consolidated turnover in 2015 of 330 million euro, while the turnover of the NaturaSi stores network reached 258 million. There are 200 outlets, of which around sixty are franchised.<sup>7</sup> The gross revenue of

<sup>4</sup> Anna Spena, Il commercio equo certificato in Italia? Ecco quanto vale. Vita, 8 giugno 2016. <http://www.vita.it/it/article/2016/06/08/il-commercio-equo-certificato-in-italia-ecco-quanto-vale/139712/>, visited 1 March 2018.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/impresa-e-territori/2017-01-10/la-classifica-gdo-eurospin-e-lidl-volano-bene-esselunga-160424.shtml?uid=ADOr8ZTC>.

<sup>6</sup> “Taking into consideration only the ethnic food that passes through the large-scale retail trade, the turnover reached 160 million euros in 2015, almost double that of 2007” <http://espresso.repubblica.it/affari/2016/10/12/news/il-cibo-etnico-muove-milioni-e-non-conosce-crisi-1.285655>.

broader agrifood system (about 330 billion) in Italy is 1000 times that of EcorNaturasi.

#### 4. The framework

A secondary analysis has been outlined for achieving a minimal check of the heuristic capacity of nested markets concept in Italy. The aim is to see whether and how nested markets are present in fragile rural areas. A lack of nested markets and the complete dependence on global, anonymous and exploiting commercial settings could be a sign of deprivation of these areas. In other words, the absence of on-site intermediaries is an element of social fragility.

The criteria for identifying nested markets have been codified in several ways. The founders (Polman et al., 2010) talk of recursive material and information exchanges, based on distinctiveness, infrastructures and commons creations, with or without intermediaries, with or without money. Even prosumers can form nested markets because they are rarely completely self-sufficient for every good/services (survivalism).

Carrosio and Osti (2018) identify two metavariables: *welfare versus environmental domains* and *single places versus network organisations*. In the first dichotomy they distinguish between relationships where the goods traded mainly convey the contents of social justice or attention to the cultural identity dimension of the exchange, with respect to relationships where the good traded mainly conveys environmental values. On one side, nested markets valorise work, the dignity of persons, and the traditions and identity of a local society. On the other, they protect the environment, through the transmission of low-carbon goods, which allow the reproduction of biodiversity. In the second dichotomy there are nesting markets focused on the interests of a circumscribed territory, on one side, and network-based exchanges in which the ways of making the traded goods count much more, on the other. In marginal areas it is more important to keep people and shops in place than to produce and sell products that fulfil demanding protocols. It is therefore expected that nested markets in those areas are mainly placed in the combination 'welfare-territory'.

Milone and Ventura (2018) emphasise procedural aspects of nested markets: they design a sort of circle that starts with values and knowledge *sharing*, continues with stakeholder *agreements*, and finishes with *institutionalisation* in North Douglas terms: clear rules help to reduce the transaction costs of the entire chain. In turn, such rules are not considered unchangeable, but frequently discussed in local arenas, thus returning to the initial point of the circle (*sharing*). Noteworthy circularity, according to Milone and Ventura, concerns not only rules but also goods, which are recycled in the nested markets, such as second hand items that are recovered, repaired and sold again by social cooperatives. This recalls the strong idea of the rural renaissance or resistance: multifunctional and internally integrated farms are more resilient than those that are highly specialised (Ploeg, 2009).

There is a further category to highlight from the nested markets literature: the *loyalty* option. It is improbable or undemocratic or not cost effective to impose choices of what to buy on consumers, as if it were a completely planned economy; at the same time the *exit* option, typical of free markets, has other problems, such as food waste or speculation on goods relative scarcity. Nested markets seem to be a way to minimise the exit option, given that *voice* does not matter in commerce. The volatility of prices and the range of choices are reduced in two ways: according to place and relationships. People produce and consume in limited spaces; they may be no-contiguous places, but they are selected in some way. Nested relationships are not bonding and

exclusive, but they are much focalised; in other words, they concentrate on some ideal aspects, such as item safety or controlled origin (traceability).

Concentration on the ideal aspects of a food is not bonding but only a matter of preference. We are still within the market or exit option. The real option for loyalty starts when there is a pact between the producer and consumer for an almost exclusive and long term exchange, such as the commitment of a producer to providing a box of vegetables every fifteen days and the commitment of consumer to buy it at the same pace. Few exceptions can be accepted: an environmental disaster for the producer, an absence for tourism for the consumer.

Cases can be analysed according to this criteria of fidelity, established ex-ante (ahead of time). This fidelity should also be expanded to other chains forming a web of exchanges among different commercial and productive sectors; we can call it a *district* rather a *filiere*. Typically, it is the district economy within which the main proportion of goods are produced, commercialised and then consumed. The most advanced experiences of district economics include, generally, food, travel agency, clothes, furniture and a variety of services, and even ethic web servers.

A list of criteria can now be drawn:

- distinctiveness
- exchange infrastructures
- commons creation
- filiere/district.

Seven Italian cases (presumably nested markets) will be analysed. They have been identified in a special way: after a conference with about 60 presentations focused on nested markets in rural fragile areas (<http://www.areefragili.it/storico-convegni/aree-fragili-2018>), the authors were invited to submit a paper to the journal 'Culture della sostenibilità'. Nine papers were selected by the editorial board and seven considered suitable for a secondary analysis. Such a reasoned or judgmental sample is therefore based on both the self-selection of authors and the selection of external evaluators. That would limit the risk of choosing completely functional cases to the authors of the secondary analysis, and would also be clear that a probabilistic sample is impossible to find for a topic as idiosyncratic as nested markets (Schneider et al., 2016).

#### 5. The seven case studies

The seven cases have been ordered in a synoptic table. The first columns show the basic features of experiences: name, main activities, operational area, actors; the further columns show the above-mentioned more interpretive criteria of analysis (Table 1).

Each case is described in a paper in the journal *Culture della sostenibilità* (Berti and D'Angelo, 2018; Genova and Viganò, 2018; Genovese and Battaglini, 2018; Gilli, 2018; Giuca and De Leo, 2018; Marciano, 2018; Tudini et al., 2018). They are written in Italian and involve cases operating within Italy. An international experience, despite published in the special issue (Borrelli et al., 2018), has not been selected for maintaining a certain uniformity of sample. Fair trade experiences, even if they represent a realised model of nested market and were present at the conference, have not arrived to publication. Probably they do not perceive themselves as such (or is simply a matter of literature segmentation).

Most cases are from central Italy; the south and north are under-represented. This may be a coincidence, or we can argue that nested markets are less frequent in south Italy, while in the north there are fewer fragile areas. The central part of Apennines chain does not contain the most demographically poor areas by chance, but at the same time, they are in those central Italian areas where social capital, a basic ingredient of embedded markets, is stronger (Cartocci, 2007).

The analysis will proceed in comparative terms; a description of

<sup>7</sup> Antonella Moro, La strada del biologico porta alla crescita, Il Sole24ore, Impresa e territori, 27 aprile 2016 <http://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/impresa-e-territori/2016-04-27/la-strada-biologico-porta-crescita-112303.shtml?uiid=ACessVGD>.

**Table 1**  
Synoptic frame for nested market cases in marginal areas.

Name	Main features	Place/operation area	Actors	Distinct Exchanged goods	Exchange infrastructure	Commons creation	District/ filiere
La bandita di Gerfalco	Project of 'community cooperative' starting from an agro-tourist activity planted by neo-rural people	Gerfalco, village of Montieri municipality hilly inner area, Tuscany	newrural household and less a nearby eco-village, coops federation, national TVs	chestnut drying warehouse; multifunctionality of community coop	It should have been a pool of local employees; but expectations have been disappointed	not yet, because local people are still wary and not involved	-
Farms/Coops serving Purchase Groups	Implementation of social farming regional policies into the network of organic farmers/coops	Mountain side of Pesaro-Urbino province, Marche	Farms, Coops, Regional Administration	Relational goods for therapeutic reasons provided with organic farming practices	boarding costs paid by local health agency for therapeutic services in the farms	It should be 'provincial scale' social capital; but discrepancy between regional policies targets and effective farms social service	District (only for food and green care)
Toma di Lanzo Producers Association	Inclusion of charismatic retailer in the livestock farms association accelerated cheese selling between mountains and cities	High mountains area (Lanzo) not far Turin metropolis (30 kms), Piemonte	Association of Toma's producers; small family farms, Inner Areas promoters, Union of Municipalities	Brand Alpine Toma (cheese) of Lanzo Valleys distinct of Toma made in lowlands	High mountain shop managed by no-farmer (catalyst); cheese factory in the lowland selling to Large Scale Retailers	Increased value of high part of Lanzo valleys; landscape conservation	Filiere
Tentaty market of spiritual Community Damanhur	Progressive openness of the shop of a New Age community to external producers and consumers	Valchiusella, hilly area nearby, Ivrea, Piemonte, former Olivetti industrial district	Damanhur community, non-member farmers, UN Global Human Settlements Forum	Mainly organic food, but the shop sells other local artisans goods; distinction based also on self-sufficiency idea	Tentaty shop placed in a former Olivetti factory; Purchase Groups external to Damanhur community	Damanhur buildings are a tourist attraction; economic integration of small farmers; esoterism (knowledge access only for initiates) limits spill over	District (partial)
Kalulu Network	Electronic commerce of peri-urban farms with urban consumers, mainly organic food; items are delivered in 'points' nearby consumers home in fixed moments	Rome and its hinterland	3-members company managing the website for exchanging; Rome part and full time farmers; in the web there are items of other places/producers	Food is marked by organic label, chain traceability and reciprocal knowledge of farmers and consumers	case of e-commerce with delivery nearby homes and small asymmetry: producers can choose the food mix to sell, while consumers cannot	lower prices for low income people; less impact of food transport; help for small producers; spread of quality food mentality	Filiere
Paysage a manger' Farm	High mountain production of local species potatoes in abandoned land by a start-up company	Gressoney Saint Jean, Lys Valley, Valle d'Aosta, production land is placed at 1800 m on sea level; the sales point in a crossroad of hikers	Neorurals start-up farm; Foundation Pro Specie Rara, Basei; Fondazione Garrone, Genua	the variety of produced potato has been taken in a Swiss seeds bank and represents an old Walser (local population) species	Shop at crossroad; direct selling to selected restaurants; e-commerce	Recovery of traditions; break with patron-client relationships of farmers (breeders, mainly) and Region Administration; but a local network did not raise	Filiere
Cittadella della Pesca (CdP), Viareggio, Tuscany	Fishers organisation, born in 2008, aiming to reduce fishing impact on sea and increasing income of fishermen; project 'Healthy Eating is possible'	Multispecies fishing along the coasts of Tuscany to be done with small ships; centre for fish fillers; school canteens in the area	CdP is a Producer Organisation (PO), of Common Fisheries Policy (CFP); technological district; municipalities, Vocational centre for Taste, Prato	to appreciate the variety of species, not only those with higher commercial value; that is healthy for people and the sea ecosystem; a brand is in preparation	3 infrastructures: CdP, Coop. Italiana di Ristorazione, public utility 'Qualità e Servizi'; thus both disintermediation and re-intermediation	Appreciation of poor fish catch reduces pressure on other species. Public health improvement especially pupils. Environmental awareness	Filiere

each case is included in the synoptic table. The main features column shows clearly that *all experiences are based on agriculture*, with one exception concerning fishing, that anyway is classified as primary activity. That case, *Cittadella della pesca*, deserves special attention because in Italy the coastal areas are rarely considered 'rural', despite their typical features, for example low urbanisation and small dimension of fishing companies. There is probably an inner lands bias, which is difficult to explain in a country with 7456 km of coast. The dominance of agriculture in the selected cases is a result of the long sequence of development policies and studies, applied to all levels of government.

If farming is the base, the traditional production of food is not always the central object. In two cases the focus is social or touristic combinations with agriculture. In *La bandita di Gerfalco* (*bandita* means reserved hunting areas) the aim is service provision for local people through a community cooperative. The many difficulties of this experience arise from the ambitious plan to approach an entire village's needs and not a specific filiere. The same is true for the social farming experience – the organic farms network of the Pesaro-Urbino province – in which the main difficulty is to match productive and assistance objectives. That raises another general issue: economic chains are more organised than welfare systems. When organisations have to integrate different fields of intervention they thus have great difficulties. Nested markets, however, pretend to be integrated.

In the case of Pesaro-Urbino there is a further problem: policies coordination. The Marche Region government thinks that social organic farms are for 'nurseries and accommodation for the elderly', while those farms receive concrete appointment for people with drug addictions or disabilities. The Marche Region takes into account the demographic drift of internal areas, while the health and municipal authorities consider typical problems of social marginality. In the middle there are organic farmers, whose main effort is production according to the protocols and commercial trends. They indeed provide organic food for groups of the province to purchase, but such a nested market is not stable or wide enough.

Food provision is the exclusive activity for all other study cases. A further question concerns the transformation of that food. According to diversification doctrine (DeRosa et al., 2019), farms are expected to keep some phases of the chain internal. The most fitting case is the association of Toma cheese producers. Indeed, also in this experience the dairy farm is not within the breeders' network neither in the marginal area. The cheese factory is located between the mountains and the plain in a strategic position for commerce. In any case, it ensures the separated manufacturing of mountain milk, whose cheese goes rapidly to urban sites as it returns to high valley shops. The nested market for Toma di Lanzo cheese is in the shape of a figure eight: two circuits of sales, one in the high mountains, the other in the Turin metropolis, touching each other at the cheese factory.

Such a shape is also evident for the potatoes of 'Paysage a manger': in this case however, the most of the potatoes are sold in the small shop in the high valley and a smaller amount to restaurants in the urbanised plain. No transformation is made within the farm. Food and other products are more processed in the spiritual community of Damanhur. They were produced according to the principle of self-sufficiency; then, like a ghetto the members were pushed to do everything within the community. As soon as they decided to open their shop to non-members, a great variety of distinct items were available and were – we add – very attractive to external consumers in search of exotic charming food. Further aspect is openness to Purchase Solidarity Groups (GAS is the Italian acronym, Brunori et al., 2010), a common means of marketing these experiences.

The Damanhur nested market is classical in form: a shop in a central position for a concentrated community, with some more distant purchasers accessing it along the main roads (radial form). The Kulu Network is the most traditional market shape: the rural periphery of Rome provides food for the big town through many points of delivery

(not shops, however). It is an evolving spatial form, because e-commerce allows the company to sell products on other more distant circuits. Frequent is in Italy the case of citrus of south Italy sent by alternative organic farms.<sup>8</sup>

For what concerns 'actors' it is noteworthy, beside farms, the centrality of single persons. Biographical method of research is often used in these case studies. An experience story involves individuals who are able to cooperate, but are single persons. They are neo-rurals or returning migrants or local people with charismatic talent. This can also happen in negative terms: when the founder of the Damanhur community died, community decided to open their internal shop to non-members. Among the actors, rural municipalities are rarely mentioned in the narration of these cases, probably because they are so small that they do not have organisational resources to help small commerce. However, some case studies are inserted in great public and private schemes, such as Cittadella della Pesca.

## 6. Are they nested markets?

Distinctiveness – the first characteristic of nested markets – is evident in three aspects of the cases analysed: organic/healthy food, producer-consumer trust and territorial identity. The last aspect is the traditional claim of the aesthetic and cultural specificity of mountain areas, which is practically translated as the landscape and the ethnic-language distinction. These two features are emblematic of the 'Paysage a manger' case: the name of old potato species also refers to German speaking minorities settled in the Italian part of Monte Rosa massif; the cultivation of high quota potatoes maintains a typical Alpine grassland which is threatened by the advance of the woods. Also in the Toma cheese case the Alpine landscape restoration is invoked.

Organic and healthy food is common to almost all cases with different aspects underlined. Cittadella della Pesca stresses the importance of 'poor' fish as nutritional, cheap and balancing the sea's ecosystem. The same case does not insist on the symbolic and historic meaning of sardines, as the typical fish of Mediterranean populations. The specific "organic" label appeals to a more institutionalised distinction. Such a label works at the commercial level (for a constant increase in the share of sales), but it is problematic at a technical level. It is not by chance that Pesaro-Urbino's organic farmers network complains of a lack of attention from the public technical assistance system, and at the same time have to face important issues arising from social farming.

The most distinct case is Damanhur community that operates as a 'sect' in Weberian terms, that is with the complete separation of members from non-members. Although they open their shop to external consumers, they maintain the aura of an esoteric community, whose products have mysterious and charming properties. The researcher studying the case uses the technical term 'esoterism', that is to keep secret most of the knowledge about the community and its practices. This is a problem because transparency and providing information is crucial in organic food production.

Producer-consumer trust is highlighted in the Kulu Network. Nevertheless, trust is mentioned in several cases and concretely represented by the relationships with Purchase Groups placed in urban areas. These groups are well known in Italy (Brunori et al., 2010). They are surely a case of nested markets. Indeed, purchase groups - who maintain in their name the label 'solidarity' - are presented in a very anonymous way, in the case studies, never as the protagonists of the experiences. It is a sign of weakness for consumers' role in embedded alternative markets. One reason is probably the low level of institutionalisation and coordination of these groups. Conversely, the

<sup>8</sup> The conference on nested markets in rural areas noted many cases of south Italy farms of this kind employing migrants on a regular basis. A special issue of the journal *Mondi Migranti* (Corrado and Osti, 2019) collected these experiences.

production side of food is highly formalised in laws, subsidies and interest groups, including organic and social farming.

It is true that relational distinctiveness requires at least two people, but it is also true that relationships can be asymmetrical, with one side trusting more than the other, at least in one single interaction. It is part of the *asymmetrical reciprocity* concept to be fruitfully used in these cases as in others (La Caze, 2008).

The second feature of nested markets is their exchange infrastructure. The Kululu Network is itself an intermediation structure equally distant from producers and consumers. The paper authors, describing the case, are biased towards the Rome hinterland farmers for previously mentioned reasons, but in theory Kululu is purely a commercial network. The infrastructure is mainly virtual (an electronic platform offering and booking food), with a material delivery system. The claim of short filiere is not absolute because the platform allows products to be purchased in very distant areas.

The Toma cheese association and Paysage a manger farm combine direct selling at the farm, or in remote valleys, with e-commerce. More traditional (and contested) sales to the large-scale retail system are only made by the Toma cheese association. Others use, as noted above, the micro channels of purchase groups. The most articulated experience is Cittadella della Pesca: poor fish selling is practised by the same fishermen's association, the *Cooperativa Italiana di Ristorazione* (a cooperative delivering convenience food), and *Qualità e Servizi*, a public multifunctional utility. It is therefore a case of both dis-intermediation and re-intermediation, a big project subsidised by public bodies and involving many actors, according to the 'pillar' tradition of former red-wing areas of central Italy.<sup>9</sup> Cittadella della Pesca also provide food processing to canteens, enlarging its intermediate role.

An example of a non-commercial infrastructure is the fees Health Agency of Pesaro-Urbino province (ASUR, district 1) pays for therapeutic services provided by organic farms. It is a triangular quasi-market in which the specificity of green care imposes discretionary and personalised relationships between the welfare operators, farmers and patient's family. The infrastructure is therefore a mix of rules and confidence between the counterparts. There are several professionals involved, such as psychologists and social workers, each with different labour contractual rules, which are generally a source of tension.

Labour relations generally involve a contract, summarised in the expression 'labour market'. This is a neglected feature in rural areas, where family farms and cooperative forms prevail. Indeed, imbalanced labour relations are quite common in the agriculture sector, creating the rise of a new slavery for migrants (Perrotta, 2016). No case study mentions this issue, but the 2018 Conference 'Abnormal Exchanges. The nested markets for rural fragile areas' collected many cases of this kind (Corrado and Osti, 2019; Iocco et al., 2019). Evidently, papers selection of *Culture della sostenibilità* favoured less problematic rural cases. Noteworthy, the only almost failed experience (Bandita di Gerfalco) faced great difficulty with the job expectations raised by the creation of a community cooperative. Such cases provide low wages and low profile jobs, both generating disappointment and dissatisfaction.

The third feature of a nested market is the creation of commons, that is benefits for the entire community, independently of how many people contribute to them. In fact commons are often the victims of free riders. Nested markets, with their capacity to create trust, are probably an antidote to opportunist behaviours. Most of the case studies created both commons and club goods. Typically, the high mountain shop selling local cheese provides a common good, landscape conservation, and a club good, higher prices only for milk from breeders' association members. The same happens in the distinction between high valley and lowland Toma cheese. The gain is in the prestige of all valley residents,

<sup>9</sup> Pillarisation means a great ideological uniformity among civil society organisations and public administration, able to provide integrated services to population (Renes and Piastra, 2011).

in general, and for the producers, in particular. Real estate values are also important. If the valley has a good reputation, then second homes and hotel prices are higher. The interplay between the different kinds of Ostrom's goods is intriguing.

In addition to landscape conservation and higher prices for local food, another benefit for these areas is social capital. This benefit is really a common, useful for reducing transaction costs and providing a general sense of social security. Most case studies mention trust, which is essentially interpersonal or given to the filiere. The confidence remains within the people doing the exchange. There is no report of spillover toward generalist institutions, such as municipalities, the Province, Churches, or even society as a whole.

A partial exception are those experiences that work more in terms of 'district' than of filiere (last column of Table 1). Only two cases out of seven show a partial district configuration because they work in at least two fields: the organic farms network in Pesaro-Urbino province and the Damanhur spiritual community. We say 'partial' because the integration of different domains is limited, the former for farming and social assistance conjunction, the latter for the arrangement of tourist, craft and food services.

The 'Aree Fragili' conference and later the paper selection have not intercepted the so called 'districts of solidary economy' (*Rete Italiana di Economia Solidale*, 2016). Their representatives, although invited to the conference, were not able to present cases. It is difficult to say for what reason, whether by chance or because they suffer the same problems of purchase groups: they are small, precarious and weakly coordinated. They are unable to create a critical mass in markets and local society. Districts of solidary economy reported great difficulty coordinating even the purchase groups operating in their territory (personal communication to Authors).

Such districts – conceived as an integration of all the fair economic activities – work in most developed urban areas of Italy. It is unrealistic thinking they can emerge in rural marginal areas. Nevertheless, such experience developed in the past in mining areas and industrial villages, very often placed in the Italian countryside (Torti, 2015). In conclusion, the more complete form of nested markets – the district – is not present in the seven selected cases. The cooperative project in Gerfalco, the nearest to the ideal type of district, faced many problems.

## 7. Weak prosumers and segmented markets for rural marginal areas

The secondary analysis of the predefined series of cases illustrated by other researchers, has allowed us to look at nested markets in a realistic way. We have avoided the danger of choosing only cases that conform to the research hypotheses. The hypothesis proposes that nested markets are places of exchange of goods and services, where consumers and producers orient one another's actions according to normative, identity, and solidarity aspects. These forms of exchange, often framed by institutions legitimising the nested spaces, allow the economic and social value chain to be re-territorialised. In this way, they create the conditions for the emancipation of the rural fragile areas, which struggle to compete in the global market.

The verification of this ambitious hypothesis can be shown in three ways: emancipating exchanges, the placement of new mediators in rural marginal areas, and the commercial integration of different kinds of goods. The analysed cases almost all show some form of emancipation through a commercial exchange: the local products are distinct, recognised, and associated with positive material and immaterial values. Producers in marginal areas increase their gains and self-esteem. Certainly, local consumers and self-consumption do not emerge. Most activities and selling practices are directed to urban consumers or tourists. The same purchase groups are placed in more urbanised areas and most of the customers for restaurants supplied with special food are probably from outside the rural area. One exception is the school canteens served by the Cittadella della pesca, but, in general the

emancipatory potential of nested exchange is more for producers than for people living in marginal rural areas. It is not therefore a matter of consumer weakness, but of an absence of rural consumers.

The placement of intermediation is the second checkpoint. In general it is clear that traditional farmers (or fishers) associations were still able to place themselves as mediators between the primary sector and society. Coldiretti (the main farmer organisation) was able to organise a wide network of farmers markets not only in the cases analysed, but across Italy. These associations, however, have lost their monopoly of representing rural communities. The seven cases show a variety of intermediation platforms. ICTs help to reduce monopolies of commerce, and help the rise of new intermediators without strong memberships. Again, the coastal case is a paradigm of a network rather than of a simple centre-periphery scheme. Evidently, the sea border provides a principle of organisation different from the classic urban-centric one.

There are ultimately three spatial forms of intermediation; classic urban-concentric, the network, and the figure of 8, in which the focal point is in between the high valley and the metropolis. The Toma cheese case, and the spiritual community of Damanhur both fit this pattern. The latter, located on an old industrial site, provides organic food to urban consumers, more or less organised in purchase groups, and a wide range of local inhabitants. The secularisation of this community is a good example of the emancipation of consumers and producers from socio-religious bonds. This community is not in an extreme location, like many eco-villages in Italy, but between the Alps and the plain, exactly as the factory of Toma cheese. This is a lesson for marginal rural areas. They can survive not having shops within their borders, but in intermediate positions as it traditionally was for livestock markets in the past, organised in middle towns placed at the foot of the mountains.

The last element of verification concerns the creation of markets in which there are a great variety of goods (not only food) and consumers who demonstrate some level of loyalty to them. This is the district form, which in Italy is called the district or network of solidary economy (Fonte and Cucco, 2017). None of the analysed cases fully represents this type, but they exist and embody the idea of a nested market in a radical way. This form is not mentioned in the theory of nested markets, probably because of a bias for filiere or because “district” implies a reduction in consumer and producer freedom of choice. Thus, it is not a market!

There is a strong tradition of industrial districts in Italy, and in some places, like Tuscany, rural or tourist districts are considered a good solution for development and deliberately planned. Marginal rural areas do not have the industrial and commercial strength to create such an integrated economy. The analysed cases reflect this limit: only specialised supra-local networks can compete with large retail operators. The organic farms network of the Pesaro-Urbino province, and the Cittadella della Pesca are (partial) examples in our sample.

Another element missing from both the theorisation and the case studies is a special focus on the labour market of marginal rural areas. Labour exchange can also be nested or segmented. This is evident in Italy for foreigners employed in animals breeding, forestry and seasonal farming. The labour force in these sectors is entirely comprised of migrants from poor countries. It is notable that practices of proscription are much more frequent for them, because they allow an excellent supplement of their low income.

Ultimately, Italian rural marginal areas, even those with few and older residents, are socially nested: neo-rurals, local people and migrants, all living the same places, but separated by the sources of their revenue, by their capacity to move and socialise in distant shops. Nested markets thus exist in such areas, but they are deeply shaped by social and physical mobility of local people.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

Giorgio Osti: Data curation, Methodology. Giovanni Carrosio:

Conceptualization, Methodology.

#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

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