CASE STUDY - IT3

VALDASO AGRI-ENVIRONMENTAL AGREEMENT (ITALY)

BRIEF PROFILE OF THE CASE STUDY

Valdaso (i.e. Aso Valley) area is a territory in Marche region (Central Italy), alongside the boundary between Ascoli Piceno and Fermo Provinces, which follows the path of Aso river. The local farming system is composed of small farms, highly specialised in **fruit production** (mostly peach). **Intensive farming**, high use of fertilizers and pesticides has created, in the past, problems of water quality and soil fertility. In 2009 was established an "**agri-environmental agreement**" (AEA), i.e. a set of commitments for farmers in a limited area, supported through a mix of **RDP measures** (both agri-environmental and information measures), activated to reach specific environmental goals. The adoption of advanced integrated pest management techniques for crop protection, instead of chemical products by a large number of local farmers, reduced the **sources of pollution for both soils and water**. Besides, it also contributed to increase **air quality** in the area, as many interviewed witnessed. By 2012 the AEA became also part the regional strategy for food labelling: the "QM-Qualità garantita dalle Marche" to **communicate to consumers**, farmers' collective commitment to sustainability.

The main environmental and social benefits studied in this case are water quality and soil functioning, as well as air quality.

KEY FACTORS IMPACTING THE PROVISION OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL BENEFITS

The main factor of success is the **policy innovation** related to the **package of Rural Development Programme measures involved in the AEA**. Common characteristics of the **local farming system** and the **proactive engagement of farmers** in the definition and implementation of the agreement, also played a crucial role. Moreover, an effective institutional support for the farmers' collective action and the integration of technical requirement in tailored policy tool, thanks to the support ensured by local institutions and by ASSAM (regional extension service), were essential. Collective action ensured **positive effects on advisory, learning and networking**, increasing the level of trust and reciprocity among farmers, creating both environmental and knowledge effects in the valley. Main emerging problems were linked to free-riding behaviour; high transaction costs, mostly for gathering farmers and dealing with complex RDP administrative requirements; lack of devolution of competences at territorial level and scarce monitoring activity on environmental and social benefits provision (soil, water and air quality).

EMERGING FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

A key element to ensure the long term supply of environmental and social benefits in the area is the **possibility to integrate the policy support with a common market strategy**, for which farmers showed high interest. However, the first attempt to valorise their environmental commitment with the valley, **the QM label**, showed some limitations and farmers are looking for more efficient market strategies. Nowadays farmers are applying for joining a new AEA according to regional RDP 2014-2020 of Marche Region. The framework is rather changed and there are some difficulties in coping with the new regulation. Transferability of the approach will be checked as different territories are trying to apply for the same scheme. Challenges are mostly related to **increasing the awareness and provision of environmental and social benefits** in this and in other areas to bring **proactive engagement of farmers and other stakeholders**.

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