

FICHE – ORGANIC FARMING CASE

“THE CONCEPT OF BIO-DISTRICT & THE CASES OF THE PARMA AND EUGANEAN HILLS BIO-DISTRICTS”

Data extracted in February 2022

Note to the reader: This set of *fiches – organic farming case* is offering additional information to the meta analysis literature review summarised in *general fiche* and set of fiches on the environmental aspects of ORGANIC FARMING SYSTEMS. Each individual case describes an initiative in different parts of organic food systems within the European Union, delivering more detailed information on possible ways to help develop organic systems.

A. THE CONCEPT OF BIO-DISTRICT IN ITALY

Definitions

'Bio-districts' are a very varied reality, which is not based on a single model, but has the common feature of referring to local development based on the values of organic farming. In practice there are two main definitions that help characterize what are 'bio-districts':

- The Italian Association of Organic Agriculture's definition of bio-district: "a geographical area naturally suited to organic farming in which the various actors of the territory (farmers, private citizens, associations, tour operators and public administrations) sign an agreement for the sustainable management of resources, focusing on organic productions that involve all the links of the supply chains up to consumption".
- International Networks of Eco Regions's definition of 'Eco-region' (term preferred to bio-district for various reasons): "territory in which a formal non-profit association has been established between companies, agricultural companies, citizens / consumers (also in associated form), local public administrations, national and regional parks, protected natural areas, commercial, tourist and cultural enterprises, social, cultural and environmental associations. Everyone commits to act according to IFOAM principles and methods of organic production and consumption".

Key features

There are many territorial declinations of bio-districts depending on the promoter, the type of partnership, the objectives to be pursued, sometimes related to specific problems to be solved, and, in general, to the pedo-climatic and socio-economic characteristics of the territory. However, despite these notable differences, organic district rests their action on the following pillars:

- The vision of **organic supply chains** as the **leverage for local development**, through their vertical and horizontal integration with other supply chains. The promotion of organic products is closely linked with the promotion of the territory, to achieve the full development of its economic, social and cultural potential. There is also a focus on context-specific local development.
- Making agriculture more sustainable by applying practices able to reduce the **environmental impact** of farming on natural resources, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and build up a diversified landscape.
- **Multi-stakeholders engagement.** Bio-districts extend participation and governance opportunities to a wide range of social constituencies. Most bio-districts are characterized by the establishment of a non-profit association between companies, agricultural companies, citizens/consumers (also in associated form), local public administrations, national and regional parks, protected natural areas, commercial, tourist and cultural enterprises, & social, cultural and environmental associations.
 - There is a constant **relationship with local administrations.** The organic district has the task of identifying the priorities of the territory and bringing them to the attention of the Administrations, which implement them and coordinate the actions necessary to satisfy them, including the promotion

of activities aimed at improving the sustainability of the territory, giving authority and support to the action of the organic district;

- **Citizens** of the organic district are involved both as recipients of education and training actions and as actors of change through their choices, not only of consumption.
- Supporting **conversion** to organic farming for 'conventional' farmers located in the district.

Next to the socio-economic valorisation of the territory and environmental safeguard, other examples of possible motivations for the implementation of bio-districts include healthy life-style promotion, increased funding attractiveness, local traditions safeguard, etc.

Legal status

In order to regulate and support these local processes, some Italian regional governments introduced bio-district regulations while other Italian regions have no particular legislative constraints. Since 2017, bio-districts are also formally recognized in the national legislation on "food districts" (Art. 1, par. 499, law 205 of 27 Dec. 2017).

Extent of coverage

The first bio-district was set up in 2009. The number of organic districts in Italy has been constantly growing since then, to the point that, in February 2021, there were 51 of them on national soil, already established or in the process of being established, characterized by different levels of operation, with a minority that already enjoys legal recognition as a food district or guaranteed by regional law. The bio-districts present in Italy at the end of 2020 involved 646 municipalities and include an area of 34,088 km² (26% of Italy's UAA).

Evolution of the concept

In the first step, organic agriculture was considered a tool for implementing local development strategies which connected local products with natural and cultural values. In the following phases, the increased adoption of organic practices by Italian farmers changed the view of organic agriculture from a starting point for bio-districts to being an objective of local development strategies.

More recently, there is also a tendency to broaden the scope of bio-districts to agroecological systems (i.e. not necessarily organic-certified, but still with a strong focus on sustainable agricultural practices). The current expectation of bio-district promoters in Italy is to approach agroecological production and consumption models, and in this way overcome certain limits of organic agriculture (such as cost of certifications or accessibility for lower income people).

As a matter of fact, bio-districts now play a strategic role into the policies undertaken by the Ministry for Agriculture to support organic agriculture and agro-ecology, as foreseen by the 2014 - 2020 European Agenda. In September 2017 the Italian Ministry for Agriculture has signed an agreement with the International Network of Bio-districts and Eco-regions INNER to enhance the exchanges among Bio-districts and their potential territorial development. Among other, the Ministry wanted to frame this agreement in its policies to strengthen rural areas to make them become sites of innovation, research and experimentation, social inclusion, resilience to climate change, biodiversity conservation, valorisation of traditional culture and knowledge.

References

<http://www.sinab.it/sites/default/files/Biodistretti%20e%20agroecologia.pdf>

http://www.sinab.it/sites/default/files/linee_guida_bio_distretti%20%202019.pdf

https://www.qualivita.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Report-Agroecologia_e_PAC-Un_analisi_degli_strumenti_della_programmazione_post_2020.pdf

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B. THE CASE OF THE EUGANEAN HILLS BIO-DISTRICT

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE ORGANIC SYSTEM

Geographical location	Italy, Veneto region
Geographical level	Region
Description	The 'Biodistretto Colli Euganei' was born in 2016. Its development was supported by the "TERRITORI BIO" project, which consisted in a three-years plan aimed at supporting the establishment and functioning of two important bio-districts in Veneto. It is located within the Regional Park of Euganean Hills. The soil and climate environment there is favourable to the production of wine and other valuable crops, and to the development of a great natural richness.
Key descriptors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valorization of local products on local markets • Sustainable growth of local businesses • Cooperation among local actors, reduction of fragmentation • Guidance and support for conversion • Bottom-up approach, joint definition of all activities by all members
Production system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2017, 5.7% of the UAA of the Biodistretto Colli Euganei was under organic farming, with an additional 11,3% of the UAA in conversion. • Main organic productions: vines (32 % of organic surface in 2017), cereals (26%), aromatic/medicinal plants (12%), vegetables (7%), olive trees (4%)
Actors involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TERRITORI BIO: The Cooperative Cantina Colli Euganei (leader partner), local organic farms, the land reclamation consortium, the local Action Group and two research institutions (University of Padova and the Italian Foundation for Research in Organic and Biodynamic Agriculture). • Biodistretto Colli Euganei: more than 50 members in 2022 including many farmers, wineries, processors, promotion associations, educational farms, consortiums, universities, municipalities, accommodation & food services
Project type	(TERRITORI BIO) EU funds through Veneto Region's Rural Development Plan
Project status/ date of report	Ongoing

2. VISUALS ASSOCIATED TO THE ORGANIC INITIATIVE



3. ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVMENTS OF THE ORGANIC INITIATIVE

Rationale / Motivation for the project	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High environmental vocation: Sites of Community Importance and Special Protection Areas • Agricultural vocation: agriculture is well integrated and has a recognized role for local communities • Sensitivity towards the conservation of the natural tourist and food and wine heritage of this area 	
Actions	
Guidance and support for local farmers (including for conversion)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly provided by means of an on-line platform for extension services, connecting local in-conversion or organic farmers and technical expertise. • Technical assistance is provided through both direct and remote ad-hoc counselling, that can be requested through an e-ticketing service. • Experimentation and research in the field and dissemination of results • Facilitate the bureaucracy for those who are in conversion or already certified thanks to sharing and support
Improve organic products commercialization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote local products through joint participation in local fairs and events • Organization of "oriented" organic food and wine and tourism circuits • Joint direct sale through establishing a trademark of bio-district products • Promote organic products in local large-scale distribution, canteens, restaurants, purchasing groups • Partnership with the thermal basin
Promotion and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization of 'oriented' organic food and wine, and touristic circuits • Information of activities for schools • Campaign to raise awareness on the use of sustainable practices in local events
Lessons	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restrictions on farming practices fixed by organic certification represents one of the main obstacles to conversion for producers. Crop-specific training courses and on-field technical assistance are thus key. • Bureaucracy for the application for certification is another important obstacle: producers are afraid to make mistakes and it is time consuming. The organic district should help in reducing the burden and the anxieties generated by paperwork. • The success of the model in this territory is linked with its capability to empower local producers by providing them a solid knowledge on organic farming as well as new and innovative economic and agronomic tool to develop the area. 	

4. SOURCES, PROJECT WEBSITE OR DATA COLLECTION ON THE CASE STUDY

Bio-district's website <https://www.biodistrettocolleuganei.it/>

Paper for a PhD student workshop "Organic Districts in Italy: the case of Veneto and the World Café approach to improve model's efficiency" <http://hdl.handle.net/11577/3306543>

C. THE CASE OF THE PARMA BIO-DISTRICT

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE ORGANIC SYSTEM

Geographical location	Italy, Emilia-Romagna
Geographical level	Region
Description	The creation of a bio-district covering the Province of Parma started in 2018-2019 with the aim to match supply, especially from small producers, and demand, represented by alternative food networks. The bio-district is still in its early stages of development. In January 2022, the City Council approved the Memorandum of Understanding aimed at activating the path for the realization of the "Bio-district of Parma".
Key descriptors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting organic production, supply chain development, and consumption in the province of Parma. • Supporting conversion to organic production. Also support the agroecological transition to increase sustainability standard in the area • Giving a territorial identity • Creation of local networks • High heterogeneity of stakeholders (even more than other bio-districts)
Production system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominant productions: forages, cereals, industrial tomatoes • Coexistence of structurally different farms, and of intensive and extensive production systems • Geographical indications (several PDO and PGI)
Actors involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A large number of stakeholders from different categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ production (farmers and processing firms) ○ distribution (the Agri-food and Logistics Center of Parma, retailers, Solidarity Purchasing Groups, local markets, restaurants), ○ Services/research and technology transfer/training (certain departments of the University of Parma, the organic experimental farm Podere Stuard, the Experimental Station for the Food Preserving Industry) ○ Local associations including both producer and consumer associations • Steering group: University of Parma (coordinator), research centers specialized in organic production, an association of small organic farms, consumers associations, the local administration of Parma
Project type	Financial support of multiple public, private and civil partners
Project status/ date of report	Ongoing

2. ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVMENTS OF THE ORGANIC INITIATIVE

Rationale / Motivation for the project	
To spread the principle of organic and agroecological agriculture and the value of economic solidarity across the whole area, while including different actors.	
Actions	
Initiation and creation of the bio-district	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The idea of establishing the Parma bio-district originates from the citizens association 'Sustainable Parma', who created the project 'Mercatiamo'. • Mercatiamo involved a set of local stakeholders in a steering group whose initial activities included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Drafting a bio-district vision, objectives and rules ○ Collecting stakeholders's views on the vision, objectives and rules ○ Drafting the institutional design of the bio-district • Rules defined the geographical limits, who can be a member, the legal status of the bio-district, and the labelling of products.
Expected actions (under development)	
<p>Product promotion and communication with consumers</p> <p>Training, technological and managerial services</p> <p>Market access support</p> <p>Sharing of knowledge and experience between members</p>	
Lessons	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting the rules governing the Parma bio-district was complex, as they were defined through an iterative process between the University and the initial stakeholders. • The involvement of local institutions is a possible key to success, especially considering that other bio-districts have experienced difficulties in setting up and managing bottom-up dialogue. • The involvement of research and educational institutions, experimental farms, and training centers in promoting dialogue with public administration bodies and farmers' unions is important as they are politically neutral with regard to the other stakeholders. 	

3. SOURCES, PROJECT WEBSITE OR DATA COLLECTION ON THE CASE STUDY

Presentation by the University of Parma <https://www.innovarurale.it/sites/default/files/2020-05/10marianna-guareschi-biodis.pdf>

Scientific paper (stakeholder analysis and potential for upscaling agroecological systems)
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su12135398>