



**EX**periential **TO**urism for sustainable **R**ural development

**WP2:** Success stories and needs mapping for VET renewal in rural tourism

**A2.1:** EU collection of success stories and analysis of national trends



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## Analysis of the current national status of rural tourism and related VET offers

### Desk Research National Report - LAND Impresa Sociale

Country: Italy

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#### **1. Does your country have a high level of rural tourism? Is there a variety of rural sectors in your country?**

Despite the strong crisis for the entire tourism sector during the Covid-19 pandemic, rural tourism, especially that linked to agritourism, was the sector that recorded the least losses, probably thanks to its location in the countryside and the availability of large open spaces. The Italian model of agricultural multifunctionality, which always represents a success story in the panorama of international rural development, has been able to quickly adapt to the changes taking place thanks to the multiple forms and activities that have gradually developed around the resources of the agricultural company. Italy is a country that offers a lot from a rural point of view and the data speaks for itself. Among the most recent trends, there is that of adding extra services offered by agricultural companies, such as educational farms and social agriculture, which very often is offered by agritourisms. According to the National Rural Network Report, in 2021, 24.515 agritourisms were registered in Italy, of which over a fifth in Tuscany, which has always been famous for its predilection for countryside tourism, and 749 registered in Sicily.

Istat (Italian National Statistics Institute) reports from the last two years claim that the vast range of activities offered were the driving force behind the growth of agritourisms and contained the negative impact of Covid. Farming companies have understood that activities and experiences are what they must focus on if they want to stand out from the competition, so much that 36% of them offer at least three activities to their guests, and for the year 2022, 84% of them declared that they want to integrate new activities so as to make their offer more complete. In addition to the classic accommodation and catering activities the report shows that other tourist-related activities organised are:

- 40.2% of companies organize tastings;
- 23.3% offer recreational, sporting and cultural activities;
- 21.4% organize educational activities;
- 5.3% organize social farming activities.

Among the most requested secondary activities are first and foremost nature itineraries, including in protected areas and nature reserves and, secondarily, guided tours of the company and processing laboratories, tastings (increased by 7.6% compared to the pre-Covid), but also horse riding, hiking, naturalistic observations, trekking, mountain biking, courses and sports which, from 2019 to 2021, show a limited increase overall (+1.5%) but with peaks of +16.3% for courses, +12.3% for naturalistic observations and +11.4% for educational farms (ISTAT 2021 data). As regards the regional distribution of activities, the same Istat report tells us that the autonomous province of Bolzano is in first place for the offer of hiking activities, Umbria for trekking, mountain biking and sports in general, Sicily for riding schools. The tastings are concentrated for 44% in central Italy, in particular in Tuscany, and for 30% in the South, especially in Sicily and Puglia, but Piedmont, Trentino-Alto Adige and Veneto are also regions with a noteworthy offer.

Reports also demonstrate the need for slow tourism, which includes alternative and relaxing activities in welcoming and under crowded places, even better if in contact with nature and local traditions. This travel philosophy, "slower" and less frenetic, is a niche that is certainly not new but which has recently been flourishing again, probably thanks to a greater sensitivity of tourists towards the environment and sustainability.

Rural tourism approach is affecting the mainstream trends, and undertourism destinations are making tourists embracing traveling during periods outside of summer. A major trend has emerged and has grown since Covid-19 and which will certainly leave its mark in future months as well: Tourists' interest in stays outside the high season. In addition to the classic summer period, in fact, there has been a growing interest in spring (+12% of bookings compared to 2022) and autumn (+11% of bookings compared to 2022). Furthermore, it was observed that stays made outside of the high season, particularly in May and September in 2023, were longer compared to 2022 (on average +6%), thus increasing their value. This flexibility in the travel period, once exclusive to foreign tourists and now increasingly interesting also for domestic tourists, offers professionals and entrepreneurs of this field a great opportunity for a better distribution of requests, thus reducing dependence on the summer season.

Another trend in the alternative tourism field has been noticed in the form of Educational Farms. In 2021, educational farms regularly registered in Italy were 3251, with a positive annual variation of 4.2% compared to 2020 and an average growth rate over the last five years of 9.3%. According to the National Rural Network Report, this increase may be due to the growing expression of interest towards food transformation processes and artisanal laboratories of agricultural products, but also towards cultivations (especially organic), livestock and farm experience/lifestyle. According to data from the National Rural Network Report, the regions with more than 200 educational farms are: Veneto (375), Campania (304), Emilia Romagna (292), Piedmont (276), Marche (243), Puglia (216), Sardinia (204), Sicily (99). These seven regions together represent almost 60% of the national offer. Often, educational farm and agritourism activities are combined: in fact, there are 1911 agritourisms authorized to carry out educational farm activities (Istat data in the National Rural Network Report, 2021).

The interest in educational farms and social agriculture (activities with a therapeutic function for children and young people with disabilities or special needs, the elderly and marginalized people) is strong both on the part of agricultural entrepreneurs and on the part of tourists. However, according to the Report, if agritourism is a now mature and consolidated sector, on the contrary, educational farms and social agriculture appear to be still in the development and experimentation phase. Although agricultural-social activities for special needs groups grew by 3.1% in 2021, the regulatory framework for social agriculture has not yet been completed, and only ten Italian regions have active updated lists. There are 341 social agriculture operators (agricultural businesses or social cooperatives) registered in these lists, with an increase of 52 units, which is 18%, compared to 2020. However, the data currently available only partially describe the size of the sector: the estimated number of social farms currently active in Italy is around 4500 units (there were only 1300 in 2013). The trend is therefore certainly positive, especially in the regions of Marche (which has 70 registered units), Emilia Romagna (67), Friuli-Venezia Giulia (54), Veneto (33), Sardinia (28), Lombardy (27), Campania (27), Liguria (19), Calabria (18) and Abruzzo (6).

The National Rural Network Report (2021) also provides information and statistics about the main booking trends in the sector. 39.2% of the companies interviewed declared that direct bookings by tourists have increased compared to 2020, especially through the company website (but also via e-mail, social networks and telephone). On the contrary, contact through intermediaries (for example portals, OTAs, agencies,

tour operators) has decreased and is less effective. On the other side, from the rural entrepreneur point of view, in addition to diversifying the offer with new experiential activities, disintermediation (cutting off intermediaries such as agencies and other touristic platforms) and taking care of the online presence through a good website, are increasingly becoming absolute imperatives for agricultural companies that want to attract alternative types of travelers. Optimizing the user experience of the site through an efficient booking engine system can then prove to be the winning card in the short term (few still take advantage of it) and, in the future, it will be almost inevitable for any company that wants to remain competitive.

So, to summarize the post Covid-19 traveling trend in Italy, we can say that has emerged a tourism approach that is:

- Attentive to the discovery of healthy and culturally authentic lifestyles within local communities, where one learns "intangible things" and returns home emotionally richer than before, eg. food and wine tourism, roots tourism, wellness, detox, inspirational tourism, transformation tourism.
- Direct toward micro and small destinations where the environment and the territory are protected by forms of social life that are not excessively invasive and the relationship with nature and its biodiversity is predominantly harmonious thanks to non-massive and destructive economic ecosystem, bringing out a new way of conceiving travel, which goes in the direction of safety, sustainability and the possibility of remote working.
- Thoughtful to medium and short-distance trips and proximity tourism, towards last minute and short bookings, preferring outdoor activities and less frequented places, the search for flexible solutions, and autonomous housing solutions.

## **2. *What national and international legislation exists in your country regarding rural tourism?***

National and community policies provide numerous tools to support and promote the Italian agritourism sector and, more generally, agricultural companies with connected profitable activities. The rural development intervention present in the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-27, which represents the legal basis for the regional tenders which will be intended to support investments for the diversification of agricultural activities into non-agricultural activities, including farmhouse;

In Italy, national regulations on rural tourism and related tourist activities, updated to 31st October 2022, contains 114 references to laws and official documents as following:

- 31 General norms for multi sectoral activities connected to agriculture and rural tourism;
- 30 Specific norms about Processing and Direct Sale of agricultural products;
- 22 Specific norms about Agritourism, wine tourism, and fishing tourism;
- 10 Specific norms on accommodation and camping in Agritourism enterprises;
- 8 Specific norms on food and beverage in Agritourism enterprises;
- 8 Specific norms about recreational and cultural activities in Agritourism enterprises;
- 5 Specific norms on Social Agriculture.

As per Italian Regions and Autonomous Provinces, there is more flexibility so each region has issued specific laws to adapt to each local tourism standards and needs. For example, four Italian regions have updated their regulations for agritourism, two regions have adopted new regulations and implementing provisions on social agriculture and one region has adopted a new regulation on educational farms. On this occasion, in some cases, regional regulations intervened by accepting some trends that emerged with the Covid-19 health emergency. Some examples:

- The Region Lombardy has introduced changes aimed at expanding the gastronomic offer and detailed information relating to agricamping with the specific form, among others, of glamping, i.e. luxury camping. With regard to social agriculture in particular, the contents and methods of carrying out the training courses, requirements and procedures for registration in the register of social farms, and obligations for carrying out the activities have been defined.
- The Region Tuscany has introduced clarifications in particular on agricamping and on how the activity is carried out. Finally, from a territorial system perspective, it is specified that the activities relating to the rural world (educational, cultural, traditional, religious and cultural tourism, recreational, sporting, hiking and horse-riding tourism, social and service for local communities) they can be organized by the farm individually or through forms of collaboration between agritourism entrepreneurs, allowing their implementation throughout the regional territory and not only in the municipality of reference of the agritourism or in neighboring municipalities.
- The Region Sicily has approved the "Provisions for the recognition of Social Agriculture operators" in order to allow the recognition of operators by the bodies responsible for managing the services and to make public the names of the recognized operators.
- The Region Piedmont has approved the regional provisions relating to the management and functionality of educational farm activities according to the regulation called Reorganization of the rules on agriculture and rural development.

### 3. *Are there any vocational training programs for rural tourism in your country?*

After an accurate research it has been found out that in Italy there are vocational training programmes about the tourism sector, but related more to Food & Beverage and Accommodation field with specific attention to agritourism. The courses and programmes are not so widespread since the concept of rural tourism in Academia and Professional Institutes is still not so well known as opposed to hotel and restaurant management courses. Nonetheless, some examples have been found:

- **Scuola Universitaria Europea per il Turismo (UET) - The European University School for Tourism** offers dedicated courses and online masters about traditional tourism, hospitality and experiential tourism. Specifically, the Master in Experiential Tourism has been launched this year (2024) and aims to offer specific training through knowledge and skills useful for analyzing the organization and competitiveness of the tourist destination, through the illustration and analysis of the technical aspects that characterize this area. Through this master the experiential tourism manager will be able to carry out an analysis of the territory and the competition of the reference tourism market and to create a tourism development project for a destination, verifying its feasibility. Creating, organising, providing and promoting a professional product designed primarily to be conveyed through the network of traditional tourist operators both online and offline: subjects who see in this approach the possibility of enhancing and specializing their offer. Moreover UET sponsors another Master in Sustainable Tourism together with **Formazione Turismo** where through the analysis of successful case studies and replicability strategies, students will be able to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to the creation of sustainable and responsible tourism. The Master focuses on the analysis of the managerial aspects of sustainable tourism. It follows that the trained professional figure has the ability to identify the principles of sustainability applicable to the various tourist destinations and to also identify structures and institutions in the area that are compatible with the preservation of the natural and artistic heritage and the sustainable promotion of the destination.



- **Social Farming - Social Agriculture for the Sicilian Citrus Supply Chain** promoted by the Citrus Production District of Sicily and the Arces College School, is a project divided into in-depth seminars and theoretical/practical training courses for technical professionals and new entrepreneurship in the citrus supply chain (production, artisanal transformation and relational tourism). Specifically, the theoretical/practical course "Le Vie della Zagara - A model of territorial promotion and relational tourism in agriculture" is aimed at training relational tourism operators as part of the territorial promotion project "Le Vie della Zagara". The participants, involving the local realities, will create travel itineraries in the territories cultivated with citrus fruits, to be promoted and in the future proposed to tour operators or individual travellers. The course will culminate in the organization of an "educational tour" aimed at sector operators along an itinerary created in the territories of PDO, PGI and organic citrus fruit production. Another interesting course to consider is "Multifunctionality of Agricultural Enterprise". The course allowed students to acquire theoretical/practical information on the concept of multifunctionality of an agricultural company. Some classic examples of multifunctionality were covered, such as: Agritourism, Rural Tourism, Tourist Services, Product Transformation, Crafts etc. The classroom training was enriched by numerous company visits to multifunctional companies that apply the principles of Integrated Relational Tourism. The course aimed to acquire knowledge and skills on multifunctional agricultural enterprises with specific focuses on the following areas:
  - multifunctionality in agriculture: principles and rules;
  - hospitality in relational tourism, with identification of rural routes that connect the tourist with the landscape, in particular that linked to Sicilian citrus fruits as an intrinsic element of the history and gastronomic culture of the island;
  - agritourism and gastronomy, with a particular focus on Sicilian culinary traditions linked to the scents of citrus fruits, the design and presentation of the dishes, their origin, the pairing of wines, in order to link the catering to the environment, the territory and its products, in a relationship between flavours, smells and places. The training included visits and internships at excellent farms and agritourisms.

At the end of the course the participants have acquired theoretical and practical knowledge as agritourism managers and future operators in the hospitality and relational tourism sector. Besides the courses, the Social Farming Project, in cooperation with Arces College School, organizes seminars and workshops on different topics and also on rural itineraries in Sicily. With these seminars they focus the attention on the topic through a participatory methodology among attendees and by actively engaging the enterprises included in the itineraries. The focus on TRI – Turismo Relazionale Integrato (Integrated Relational Tourism) allows attendees to analyze the reference context, definitions and evolution (from research to application), and introduction to the main related topics, innovative tourism and network strategies, illustration of the application of the Itinerary formula as an implementation tool of the TRI in the territories of citrus excellence included in the Citrus District of Sicily (Distretto Produttivo Agrumi di Sicilia).

- **Associazione Italiana Turismo Responsabile (AITR)** since 1998 it has been working for the affirmation and diffusion of the culture, principles and practices of sustainable and responsible tourism. It promotes positive interaction between local communities, travelers and tourism operators. Supports the development of its members. AITR brings together travel organisers, environmental organisations, NGOs, cultural associations, cooperatives, hospitality operators and service companies. AITR promotes dialogue with the tourism industry by not considering conventional tourism to be irrecoverable, and instead tries to orient it towards the adoption of good practices. AITR together with the **Accademia Creativa Turismo e Idee per Viaggiare** sponsors a Master in Sustainable and Responsible Tourism to encourage entrepreneurship and management of sustainable tourism. The Master is the "Full Training" advanced training course

that trains tourism managers and technicians for professional placement within the main tourism companies operating in the sustainable and responsible tourism sector. The reference contexts of the Master are represented by the different expressions of Sustainable Tourism: from Responsible Tourism to Outdoor Tourism practices (trekking, cycle tourism, water tourism); from adventure tourism to sports tourism; from cultural and experiential tourism to tourism aimed at summer camps for young people and environmental education projects up to tourism linked to cooperation projects and local development.

#### ***4. What is the responsible governing body/institution for supporting rural tourism entrepreneurs/professionals in your country?***

The main institutional body responsible for supporting the tourism sector and tourism enterprises is the Ministry of Tourism. The Ministry of Tourism takes care of the planning, coordination and promotion of national tourism policies, within the competence of the State, in relationship with the Regions and local authorities, in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), with the European institutions and supranational bodies, as well as with trade associations and businesses. The main areas in which the Ministry carries out its functions are:

- the development and implementation of development and integration plans for national tourism policies and the hospitality system, as well as European and international ones; the definition and implementation of government policies for the valorization of mountain territories, internal areas and smaller islands;
- the promotion of initiatives aimed at strengthening the tourist offer and improving tourist and accommodation services, also relating to fairs and agritourism, in conjunction with the regions, local authorities and supervised bodies, without prejudice to the different responsibilities of the other administrations;
- the development of tourist assistance and protection initiatives; the development of programs and the promotion of initiatives aimed at raising awareness of sustainable and heritage-friendly tourism;
- the promotion and implementation of innovation projects in favor of the tourism and hospitality sector, both on national funds and in reference to programs co-financed by the European Union; the planning and management of interventions within the structural funds; the promotion of investments within its competence abroad and in Italy.

Also, the Permanent Committee for the promotion of tourism in Italy is based and operates at the Ministry of Tourism. Furthermore, the National Tourism Agency (ENIT), a public economic body, has the task of promoting the unified image of the national tourist offer and encouraging its marketing.

Besides the Ministry of Tourism, also the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Sovereignty, and the Ministry of Culture have some roles for providing funds and support for multisectoral and multifunctional enterprises that are related to different fields of rural tourism, such as agritourism or cultural tourism, slow tourism, etc.

#### ***5. What efforts have been made by different authorities in your country to promote rural tourism?***

An attempt to coordinate actions was made in 2010 with the Tourism Pact, which outlined a series of interventions aimed at acting on tourism supply and demand by focusing on issues of competitiveness and promotion. The real turning point, however, was reached in 2017, when Italy equipped itself for the first time with a Strategic Tourism Plan (PST) which collects ideas and proposals to direct and improve sector choices, as well as encourage integration between stakeholders' areas and skills.

In fact, from the discussion between operators and institutions, the national tourism strategy was outlined aimed at affirming Italy's leadership as the country of travelers who appreciate art and culture, the environment and gastronomy, focusing on the multiplicity of resources and reality of our peninsula. The Plan proposes a model of sustainable development that leverages the territoriality and diversity of the landscape and cultural heritage, the opportunity to achieve better levels of financial and economic sustainability, strengthening the prospect of its lasting management.

An important contribution to the protection and valorisation of cultural heritage is provided by cohesion policies: these include, at community level, the Structural Funds (European Regional Development Fund - ERDF - and European Social Fund - ESF) and those for European Territorial Cooperation (ETC); at national level, however, they concern the Development and Cohesion Fund (Fondo Sviluppo e Coesione - FSC). Community and national funds intersect in order to promote a sustainable cultural tourism offer, in close connection with territorial policies. The projects financed by the ERDF in the cultural field, for example, mainly concern restoration, recovery and valorization of cultural heritage; as regards services, however, they mainly finance the promotion, diffusion and dissemination of the cultural offer and places of culture, and the productions of the audiovisual industry.

The FSC has a long and consolidated tradition of intervention in the Culture and Tourism sector; these are investments made both by central administrations and by local and regional government levels and include not only interventions for the recovery and redevelopment of historic centres, but also small-scale interventions and on widespread cultural heritage assets or contexts with a strategic role for territorial contexts. Furthermore, in this context, interregional initiatives are also financed to promote lesser-known destinations such as "villages" through the use of digital channels and networks for the integrated management of the tourist offer (under the responsibility of the Ministry of Tourism). Also of relevance for tourism are the actions owned by the Ministry of Culture (MIC) which support interventions to promote access to culture and the regeneration of small towns, the protection and valorisation of rural heritage, the restoration of religious cultural heritage as well as actions to support the creative industry and protect cultural heritage sites.

Specifically, these policies support the development of cultural tourism in rural areas mostly through the creation of investments of a material nature made by Local Authorities on behalf of the community. These are actions aimed at 1) Retraining 2) Planning and Raising Awareness. The first typology includes projects aimed at redeveloping/recovering the historic centers of small rural villages and those for the restoration and valorisation of architectural and natural resources (interventions on buildings of historical and architectural value, courtyards, fountains, wells, wash houses, market areas, green spaces, etc.). The second group concerns the systematization and programming actions of culture within the development and/or management plans of municipalities and protected areas; for this purpose, funding is provided for the carrying out of research, feasibility studies, impact assessment, etc.

Overall, these investments have an impact on the local population, but, in fact, they also make the places accessible - physically and culturally - to the travelers. The majority of recoveries on the architectural heritage, in fact, are linked to the implementation of activities for collective purposes, such as the creation



of rest areas for "wayfarers", points of tasting and selling local products, knowledge of the historical-cultural heritage local, such as museums and exhibition centres. Furthermore, this area also includes all those interventions aimed at recovering and enhancing traditional artefacts connected to agricultural practices and strategic components of the rural landscape.

With the reform that affected the CAP in the period 23-27, to identify investments aimed at increasing cultural tourism development in rural areas, we refer to *Esigenza E3.5 - Increase the attractiveness of territories and encourage tourism, above all sustainable, through the redevelopment of their heritage*. The interventions connected to it concern both productive interventions of an infrastructural type, but with recreational purposes at the service of the community and the visitor (*SDR07- Investments in infrastructures for agriculture and for the socio-economic development of rural areas, Action 5*), and investments for the creation of cultural services and the recovery of buildings of cultural value (*SRD09- Non-productive investments in rural areas*). Once again, therefore, the interventions to support the cultural dimension of tourism are combined with those planned for local use. Also connected to requirement 3.5 of the PSP is the *SRD14 intervention - Non-agricultural productive investments in rural areas* which finances artisanal activities aimed at valorising the territories and local characteristics, i.e. interventions to support local production in order to increase the value of the heritage culture. It should be specified that, consistently with the strong relevance of the identity trait of agricultural/artisanal products, this intervention will be activated above all by the LAGs in the Leader context. Furthermore, at a local level, the activation of the *SRG07 intervention is envisaged - Cooperation for rural, local development and smart villages* within which cultural tourism development can be financed within the scope of the actions envisaged for the development of the "Cooperation for rural tourism".

## **6. In your country are there any funding opportunities for entrepreneurs who wish to start a rural tourism business?**

As it is known, during 2021 the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR - Recovery and Resilience Plan) was approved, a document created by the Italian Government on the basis of guidelines defined by the European Commission, which contains all the interventions that will be financed with European Union resources as part of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) plan and which will have to allow Italy to emerge from the crisis caused by the pandemic and, at the same time, adapt the economic model towards greater environmental and social sustainability. The PNRR foresees investments amounting to 191.5 billion euros and is divided into six Missions, especially the first one is about Digitalisation, innovation, competitiveness, culture and tourism. Moreover, to combat the Covid-19 emergency the Legislative Decree "Sostegni bis" intervened with extraordinary aid for agriculture which, indirectly, also concerns other activities related to agriculture (articles contained in Title VIII Agriculture and Transport). The most important measures concern: administrative simplification procedures and tools to expand access to credit for the entire sector; compensation for workers in the agricultural and fishing sectors; compensation for damage from adverse weather conditions; contributions for the livestock, sugar beet and craft beer sectors, for forms of sustainable agriculture and organic farming districts, for the development of technological solutions and innovative projects; extension to women of the facilitation measures already provided for the start-up of new businesses by young people.

Regarding the measures from the Ministry of Tourism, with the Ministerial Decree of 22 March 2023 "Application provisions for the distribution and disbursement of the resources allocated to the Fund intended to strengthen interventions aimed at promoting ecotourism and sustainable tourism", the Ministry has validated a Fund that will have a multi-year validity over the three-year period 2023-2025

and a total endowment of 25 million euros. The measures are aimed at accommodation facilities, including non-business ones, and tourism businesses that will pursue the following objectives:

- strengthen major cultural destinations through the promotion of forms of sustainable tourism, the alleviation of tourist overcrowding, the creation of innovative tourist itineraries and the deseasonalization of tourism;
- promote the ecological transition in tourism, with actions to promote intermodal tourism according to emission reduction strategies for tourism;
- support accommodation facilities and tourism businesses in activities useful for obtaining sustainability certifications.

As regards the interventions owned by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forestry (MASAF), the total funds allocated are 3.68 billion euros, divided between the following interventions: logistics development for the agri-food, fishing and aquaculture, forestry sectors, floriculture and nursery; agricultural park; innovation and mechanization in the agricultural and food sector; investments in the resilience of the agro-irrigation system for better management of water resources. These interventions, located within the second Mission Green revolution and ecological transition, evidently also concern agritourism activities and other diversification activities which, moreover, are also affected by interventions in support of the digitalisation of rural territories, the valorisation of architecture and the rural landscape and the attractiveness of the villages (Mission 1).

Regarding the intervention of the CAP Strategic Plan (Piano Strategico della PAC - PSP) 2023-27, which will guarantee support for agritourism activities, it should also be specified that it can be combined with other rural development interventions through integrated planning according to the methods established by the Regions and Autonomous Provinces and, in particular, with the installation interventions of young and new farmers. Overall public spending to support diversification in the 2023-27 PSP amounts to over 272 million euros (124.8 million EAFRD share and 147.5 million co-financing). It is strange to note how agritourism, which under the Italian legal system is to all intents and purposes an agricultural activity, is instead considered a non-agricultural activity at community level. Evidently, despite the widespread recognition of the importance of diversification by the Commission, in many ways it is still difficult to understand how an agricultural company can fully and professionally carry out tourism-type activities, while fully maintaining the structure of a company that cultivates or does zootechnics.

A successful example of funding for young rural entrepreneurs that can be reported is the case of the agricultural company L'essenza degli Iblei located in Canicattini Bagni (Siracusa, Sicily). The company is located in the Hyblean area of Sicily, which is rich in different varieties of indigenous medicinal plants including conehead thyme, oregano, cistus and helichrysum. After inheriting the business from his grandfather, Alfredo Uccello led the company towards 100% organic production. Mr. Uccello also produces honey from sedentary beekeeping (blossom and thyme) as well as propolis, beeswax and pollen. Among the company's specialties are soaps, creams and bubble baths. Very attentive to safeguarding the environment, the company is ICEA (Institute for Ethical and Environmental Certification) certified for organic products and uses environmentally sustainable packaging made of cellulose pulp, recycled paper and glass to minimise the use of plastics. The company has been funded through the PSR Sicilia (the Rural Development Programme - RDP) within the PAC under the EU priority - Increasing farm profitability and competitiveness, Measure 6.4 - Start-up aid for young farmers and support for investments in the creation and development of non-agricultural activities. The RDP intervention has enabled the company to maintain its high production standards and focus on 100% organic production. The farm has also achieved

energy self-sufficiency through the installation of photovoltaic panels for electricity, and solar thermal panels for hot water and distillers. Other interventions geared towards eco-sustainability include rainwater recovery systems for both the flushing of toilets and greenhouse irrigation. In addition, the company studied how to use organic residue as compost in the nursery, and for recycling, also reaching agreements with a plastic recycling company. Care for the environment and skilful use of the Internet and social media are the results of a contemporary approach to farming and the support offered by the RDP.

## **7. *Do you have any best practices/successful examples regarding rural tourism in your country?***

In the coming years, rural tourism could play a very important role in helping to direct the dynamics of socio-economic and environmental transformation and restructuring of the territory. Italy, with a solid national regulatory base, is the country that gave life to the model of perhaps the most complete, evolved and articulated rural hospitality on the international scene: agritourism. The consolidated agritourism system combined with the food and wine, cultural and experiential fruition circuits in rural areas, can present itself as an enriching element with the aim of stimulating the increase in visitor flows by favoring a model of sustainable valorization of human and landscape resources.

We can bring together under the word "typical" the re-proposal in a modern key of what tradition has preserved and handed down to us (the traditional forms of agriculture, breeding, ancient crafts) but also, above all, the two great themes of food and wine and of the historical rural building heritage. Today the typical local village/entrepreneur/community looks to the future, adopting strong components of innovation (e.g. product transformation techniques or bio-architecture techniques for restorations) which however do not distort the matrix and forms of tradition. The third great path concerns the new environmental awareness, which today becomes a key to choose one's tourist purchases. This factor already influences holiday choices today, constitutes an element of selection of the place where to stay, and affects the ways in which it is enjoyed. From food, to building construction techniques, to the conservation of biodiversity, to the use of water, to the self-production of energy, to the conservation of organic substance, to the protection of greenery (plantings, woods, forest), up to, in perspective, to a truly zero impact of tourist activity.

Starting from 2013, Italy has created a real model for the promotion and protection of the national agritourism sector consisting of a set of tools provided for by the two ministerial decrees implementing Framework Law 96/2006. Through these three tools, a set of best practices to be followed by companies has been created:

- The national brand "Agriturismo Italia" (approved by Ministerial Decree 13/02/2013) which distinguishes agritourisms regularly operating on the national territory and represents a powerful branding tool towards national and international customers;
- The "Sunflower" Classification System of Farmhouses with accommodation (whose criteria were issued by the Ministerial Decree 02/13/2013) is able to provide synthetic information on the level of comfort and the range of services offered, in similar to what happens with stars for hotels;
- The National Agritourism Directory (established by the Ministerial Decree 03/06/2014) constitutes the official list of all the companies recognized by the individual Regions and Autonomous Provinces and contains detailed information on the services offered, representing the first example in our country of an official catalogue of companies recognized by both the State and local administrations.

The Agriturismo Italia system, made up of all these tools, has enormous potential, partly still unexpressed. Since it was officially launched at the Milan Expo in 2015, thousands of companies have signed up.

However, the application of the national strategy based on the Brand-Classification-Directory system has not been uniform in all areas of the country and is still partially unimplemented in some territories.

Among the agritourism companies that have started following this system, it is worth mentioning that is considered successful the case where entrepreneurs have been able to seize the opportunities linked to the creation of profitable activities connected to agricultural ones, also producing a spillover effect which generates positive externalities both for the rural territories involved and for the environment. Specifically, the "business case" that is presented has benefited from the resources of the regional rural development programs provided through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). This demonstrates how this type of intervention is fundamental to allow the development of entrepreneurial ideas, encouraging private investments aimed at diversification in non-agricultural activities which today represent, more and more frequently, an important source of supplementary income for companies in the primary sector. The investments made thanks to community support have often favored the modernization of agricultural companies, the improvement of the quality of services, products and processes with a view to sustainability.

The Agriturismo Bergi is proposed as a successful example because it is an agricultural company with a strong rural tourism component that has adopted organic production systems, from having undertaken a path to combat climate change through the production of energy from renewable sources and from being important safeguards of the rural landscape, having recovered and preserved the typical architecture of the territories in which it operates.

Agriturismo Bergi is located in Castelbuono (Palermo, Sicily) one of the most characteristic centers of the Madonie Natural Park. It is spread over approximately 100 hectares of surface area, planted with olive trees, vegetables, fruit, citrus fruits, ash for the production of Manna and almond trees; Sicilian black bees are also bred for the production of honey. All production is entirely certified organic and is used mainly for catering, processing and tasting. The family-run farm is characterized by female predominance with the owner Anna Sottile sharing a passion for agriculture and nature with her husband and four daughters. The three categories considered to be included as successful example are:

- Support income and innovation: Within the company, the aspect of discussion and storytelling play a fundamental role, especially in setting up the educational farm program. Through ancient tales and storytelling, the experience of rural life, the explanation of the products and the importance of the connection with the territory is transferred to the little ones. The educational activities for children are combined with guided tastings, excursions in the Madonie park and cooking workshops, also intended for an adult audience. The company, in addition to focusing on web marketing and social communication, uses e-commerce to ship its products and, over the years, has developed numerous innovative ideas.
- Protection of environment and biodiversity: The company has joined the project for the reintroduction and conservation of the subspecies at risk of extinction "Apis mellifera Siciliana", financed by the Sicilian Region, and produces Sicilian black bee honey, a Slow Food presidium, to encourage the focus on the species. In this way it contributes to the repopulation and conservation of this genetic breed by managing 400 hives located within the Madonie Park and on the island of Lampedusa. The company is also part of "Simenza - Cumpagnia siciliana sementi contadine", a community of entrepreneurs who cultivate and breed, mainly organically, only local varieties and breeds and represents a significant example of recovery of tradition. The company also keeps an ancient variety of Sicilian wheat, the Maiorca di Pollina, which has almost disappeared because only a very small quantity of seeds exists. Finally, to protect the environment, the company has adopted a photovoltaic system to produce energy from renewable

sources and a water purification system and has obtained various awards and recognitions for its particular sensitivity to environmental issues.

- Rural areas, landscape and quality production: The female component in the company is a strong point in combining the management of the agricultural activity with hospitality. The owner Anna was the first woman in Sicily to obtain an agritourism authorization and one of the first to benefit from the resources for the youth settlement and today, with the support of her four daughters, she has chosen to embark on a path that aims to improve company performance, combining innovation and tradition. The company is specialized in excellent Sicilian organic products: jams, extra virgin olive oil, vegetable preserves, vegetables, almonds, wine, sauces, flavourings, honey and manna.

There are many companies that have made sustainability their flag, their most recognizable mark, investing in terms of biodiversity, local culture, reduction of the use of chemicals, conservation and reconstitution of the landscape, care of the soil, reforestation. It must be highlighted that agritourism, in its most noble and true meaning, cannot be separated from its agricultural system, understood both as a connection within the business unit and in the development of local partnerships with other companies agricultural activities in the area, and in the valorisation of local culture. This integration is the real secret to lasting success.

Agritourism, and with it the comprehensive system of multifunctional agriculture (direct sales, teaching and training, the production of environmental goods, social agriculture), increases the integration of the territorial offer without forgetting authenticity and the strong component of the human encounter. A true, authentic offer, built on the women and men who live in the countryside and present it in person to their guests.