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MEDITERRANEAN DESERTIFICATION

A Mosaic of Processes and Responses

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26 Social and Economic Conditions of Development in the Agri Valley

E. BOVE AND G. QUARANTA
University of Basilicata, Potenza, Italy

1 INTRODUCTION

The Agri Valley may be divided geographically and socio-economically into three distinct parts: Upper, Middle and Lower (Basso et al. 1998). Each of the three can be considered roughly homogeneous in terms of physical environment, natural resources, social conditions and economic development (Quaranta 1997). However, the influences on socio-economic development may come from a much wider area, from the mountains to the alluvial lands of the coastal plain.

2 DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION

2.1 Contemporary Distribution of Population

The Agri Valley is part of Basilicata, which covers an area of 10 000 km² in southern Italy, with slightly more than 600 000 inhabitants (ISTAT 1997). The area is divided in two provinces, Potenza (the chief town) and Matera, and 131 municipalities of which about 40 are partially or totally within the Agri Valley. This study concentrates on 29 of the municipalities (Table 26.1).

Basilicata is predominantly mountainous or hilly. The woodland and pasturelands were once the summer location of transhumant flocks of sheep and goats that spent the winter near the coast. During the summer, people would live in small farms scattered throughout the woodlands and pasturelands. What distinguishes the hilly areas today is the widespread presence of badlands, shrubby areas, and arable lands cultivated with durum wheat (Bove and Quaranta 1996). The summer drought is extreme, the population is very small and the desolate countryside is liable to frequent landslides. In contrast, the coastal plain has recently been characterized by a rapid and continuous population growth and a big increase in the cultivation of intensive crops such as vegetables, strawberries and citrus fruits.

2.2 Historical Features

Historical settlements in the Agri Basin have been described by Boenzi and Giura Longo (1994). Recently, a Neolithic settlement has been discovered in the Upper Agri Valley (Bianco and Cataldo 1994) a short distance from the source of the Agri River, known in ancient times by the name of *Akiris* (Adamesteanu 1995). There is also evidence of extensive Roman civilization (Soprintendenza Archeologica della Basilicata 1981).

In the Middle Agri Valley archaeologists have uncovered a remarkable monastic settlement (Fonseca 1995) indicating ancient contact between the local population and Greek colonization on the coastal margin of the Lower Agri (Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali 1996). Later the coasts became infested with malaria, driving the population out (Rossi Doria 1963).

Table 26.1 Total surface, resident population and density in 1995

Communes	Total area		Population		Density (inhabitants km ⁻²)
	km ²	%	Total	%	
Upper Agri Valley	592.25	28.80	32 245	32.55	54.44
Marsico Nuovo	101.03	4.91	5468	5.52	54.12
Paterno	39.25	1.91	4246	4.29	108.18
Marsicovetere	37.82	1.84	4443	4.49	117.48
Viggiano	89.03	4.33	3181	3.21	35.73
Tramutola	36.48	1.77	3253	3.28	89.17
Grumento Nova	66.17	3.22	1919	1.94	29.00
Moliterno	97.65	4.75	4966	5.01	50.86
Sarconi	30.46	1.48	1389	1.40	45.60
Spinoso	37.82	1.84	1831	1.85	48.41
Montemurro	56.54	2.75	1549	1.56	27.40
Middle Agri Valley	960.18	46.66	29 766	30.06	31.00
Castelsaraceno	74.18	3.61	1932	1.95	26.04
San Chirico Raparo	83.00	4.03	1537	1.55	18.52
San Martino d'Agri	50.25	2.44	1085	1.10	21.59
Armento	58.50	2.84	889	0.90	15.20
Corleto Perticara	88.98	4.32	3243	3.27	36.45
Guardia Perticara	52.95	2.57	789	0.80	14.90
Gallicchio	23.48	1.14	1071	1.08	45.61
Missanello	22.30	1.08	685	0.69	30.72
Gorgoglione	34.23	1.66	1326	1.34	38.74
Cirigliano	14.93	0.73	502	0.51	33.62
Rocccanova	61.63	3.00	1998	2.02	32.42
Aliano	96.32	4.68	1425	1.44	14.79
Sant'Arcangelo	89.47	4.35	7082	7.15	79.16
Stigliano	209.96	10.21	6202	6.26	29.54
Lower Agri Valley	504.94	24.55	37 017	37.38	73.31
Craco	76.28	3.71	894	0.90	11.72
Tursi	156.93	7.63	5812	5.87	37.04
Montalbano Jonico	132.94	6.46	8594	8.68	64.65
Scanzano Jonico	71.50	3.48	6578	6.64	92.00
Policoro	67.29	3.27	15 139	15.29	224.98
Total Agri Valley	2 057.37	100.00	99 028	100.00	48.13
Basilicata	9 992.27		6 09 238		60.97
Total Agri Valley/Basilicata	0.21		0.16		

Source: elaboration on ISTAT data.

3 DEVELOPMENTAL ASPECTS OF THE POPULATION

3.1 Demographic Dynamics

The Agri Valley has experienced social and economic problems in common with the rest of southern Italy, mainly concerned with isolation. Mountains with only limited areas worth cultivating, arid hilly areas and malaria-infested lowlands have discouraged investment so that there are few roads and inadequate services. These factors, together with the absence of secure employment opportunities, have been a barrier to socio-economic progress until recently. A hundred years ago the standard of living was particularly low, soil erosion was widespread following deforestation, and there was the

added threat of natural disasters such as earthquakes, so many southern Italians emigrated overseas (Villani and Massafra 1968). The exodus so worried the mayor of Moliterno that he welcomed the Italian president of that time with the words: "I greet you in the name of my eight thousand citizens, of which three thousand have emigrated to America, and five thousand are preparing to follow them" (Sereni 1968).

Between the First and Second World Wars the politics of the Fascist regime in Italy largely prevented further migration, but after that more Italians emigrated, particularly to South America and Australia. From the mid-1950s to the end of the 1970s, migration patterns shifted more to northern Italy and other European countries. Since then emigration has become insignificant but within the Agri Valley there have been changes in the distribution of the population, with the population from isolated rural areas tending to move to new centres on the coast. The total population of the Agri Basin rose from 80 000 in 1861 to approximately 100 000 in the mid-1990s. However, the population of the isolated Upper Agri Valley declined by about 20% over the same period. The population of the historic centre of Marsicovetere, at an altitude of 1000 m a.s.l., has declined to only a few hundred, while down in the valley bottom the new centre of Villa d'Agri has a population of more than 4000. Likewise, in Montemurro, the population has halved since 1861 to around 1550 today.

The same trends are occurring in the Middle Agri Valley. While the centre of San Brancato, in the territory of Sant'Arcangelo, continues to expand along the principal road, the population continues to decrease in the old historic centres. Between 1861 and 1995 the population declined by over 70% in Armento and Cirigliano.

In contrast, the population throughout the Lower Agri Valley has been expanding. With the exception of Craco, where the population halved over the period 1861–1995, the other municipalities have demonstrated exceptional expansion. In this relatively densely populated sub-area the small town of Policoro has emerged with more than 15 000 inhabitants.

3.2 Migration Consequences

The high numbers of people who have felt forced to migrate from the Agri Basin have greatly modified the demographic structure. The elderly persons index is calculated as a percentage ratio between the resident population over 65 years old and the population under 6 years old (in 1991). In the Agri (Figure 26.1) this index shows clearly the demographic fragility and impoverishment. It is clear that many municipalities are inhabited only by elderly retired people. In Figure 26.1, note



Figure 26.1 Distribution of the elderly persons index for the Agri Basin in 1991

Table 26.2 Major socio-economic indicators, 1991 (percentages are shown in parentheses)

Demography	Upper Agri Valley	Middle Agri Valley	Lower Agri Valley	Total
Under 6 years	1.903	1.595	2.495	5.993
Over 6 years	30.176	29.605	33.928	93.709
6-14 years	4.223	3.711	5.577	13.511
15-65 years	21.218	20.006	24.756	65.980
More than 65	4.735	5.888	3.595	14.218
Elderness index (65/5 x 100)	249	369	144	237
People with university degree/total population	2	2	2	2
Illiteracy in population >6 years old	7	10	6	8
Retired/total population	16	23	12	17
Total migration value	-123	-209	-34	-366
Total population variation	1.824	1.554	2.447	5.825
Active population	12.286	12.387	15.101	39.774
Employed	8.788 (72)	8.373 (68)	10.885 (72)	28.046 (70)
Unemployed	3.498 (28)	4.014 (32)	4.216 (28)	11.728 (30)
Agriculture	2.042 (20)	3.039 (30)	3.752 (30)	8.833 (27)
Industry	3.578 (35)	2.978 (29)	3.427 (27)	9.983 (30)
Other activity	4.650 (45)	4.106 (41)	5.310 (43)	14.066 (43)
Agricultural Sector				
Farms	4.792	6.178	4.550	15.520
Total surface (ha)	50.851	80.863	41.590	173.304
Farms <2 ha	2.246 (47)	2.487 (40)	1.311 (29)	6.044 (39)
Farms 2-5 ha	1.108 (23)	1.474 (24)	1.334 (29)	3.916 (25)
Farms 5-10 ha	662 (14)	783 (13)	1.216 (27)	2.661 (17)
Farms 10-20 ha	401 (8)	642 (10)	334 (7)	1.377 (9)
Farms 20-50 ha	260 (5)	483 (8)	237 (5)	980 (6)
Farms >50 ha	111 2	307 5	116 3	534 3
Industry				
No. of firms	2236	2032	2222	6490
Employed	4698	3753	5408	13859

Source: elaboration on ISTAT data. Percentage values are in brackets.

how the index decreases through the three sub-areas, passing from an extreme of more than 1100 at Cirigliano (Middle Agri Basin), to 93 at Policoro (Lower Agri Basin). One of the consequences of having a predominantly elderly population is the difficulty in arranging schooling for the remaining children, who may be dispersed over a wide area. The situation appears particularly alarming in the marginal centres of the Middle Agri Valley where poverty is rife. In these municipalities, the unemployment rate is very high. For the entire basin it was 30% in 1991, which was almost three times the national figure. Employment in agriculture accounted for nearly 30% of the basin's workforce in 1991 (Table 26.2).

4 ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Farming has always played a very important role in the economic system of the Agri Basin. In the high part of the basin there is fertile land in the valley bottoms (about 10 000 ha) and an abundant water supply. The availability of water has favoured agriculture, particularly dairy farming, and recently horticulture and fruit growing, aided by irrigation. In the 1920s rice was introduced but the results were not encouraging (Azimonti 1929). It was in the early 1950s that a programme of expansion and reorganization of irrigation was begun. This enterprise has produced excellent results in terms of productivity and revenue, not only for the big farms but also for the numerous small part-time family farms on the right bank of the Agri River. These farms are noted for high productivity of the cropping system and especially for high quality beans. Recently this rather labour-intensive crop (Bove 1993) has been recognized by the European Union as a product with *Protected Geographical Indication* (PGI). Since this prestigious recognition, acreage of beans has increased by 300% in the last seven years. Beginning with this typical agricultural product, marketed with the name "*Fagioli di Sarconi*" (Sarconi's beans) the possibility of introducing a collection of typical, specialist products of the Upper Agri Valley gradually emerged. A number of factors helped to make this idea a success. There was increasing unemployment as industrial ventures and subsidies failed but here was an opportunity to make money out of tourism (Caneva 1996). This area is rich in archaeological treasures and farm holidays are popular. The number of winter tourists is also increasing. People are interested in rediscovering old traditions (Larotonda 1996), and traditional local foods, such as ham, apples, wine and cheeses from goat and sheep milk. In addition, the National Park of Val d'Agri and Lagonegrese was created.

In the Middle Agri Valley one can pass with amazing rapidity from the most desolate uninhabited stretches to tracts that are prodigiously fertile. In fact, only in the beds of Agri River and its tributary the Sauro are there the environmental conditions that permit flourishing forms of agriculture, such as the horticulture and fruit growing on the small-holdings known as "*Sant'Arcangelo's Gardens*". Small-holdings are widespread around the populated centre, where on the steeper slopes generations of hardworking peasants have tended olive trees. Another important characteristic of this area lies in the widespread cultivation of durum wheat on land that is far from naturally suitable. Subsidies have encouraged production, even when the return has proved uneconomic. In the area as a whole, uneven annual incomes and hidden unemployment are common.

All the new plans and ventures for specialist products were going well until a multinational consortium recently discovered large oil deposits in the Middle and Upper Agri Valley (Figure 26.2). Mining of the crude oil deposits has begun and could completely change the economy of the region, but it is not clear how much the resident population will benefit. The exploitation of the oil will involve the creation of at least 50 wells, which will surely have a negative impact on the image of the quality of the agricultural products and on the environment (Figure 26.3).

In the Lower Agri Valley land reclamation and land reform since 1950 have created systems of production that are second to none in the Mediterranean Basin. Here advanced structures and farming practices produce commodities highly competitive in both the national food processing industry and in the international markets for fresh products. However, these farms are under pressure because the demand for land for urban use and recreational activities has increased dramatically.



Figure 26.2 The valley bottom in the Upper Agri Valley



Figure 26.3 Oil well in a vineyard

In conclusion, the Agri Basin is a region of widely divergent extremes. Farming will always play an important role in the rural areas, but it must be adapted to prevalent social and environmental conditions.

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