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POSTER ABSTRACT

Reference Poster Session: Track 1: Innovation in Bioeconomy Governance and Policy
Bottom-up Approaches (Clusters, Regional Initiatives, Networks)

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TITLE
Eco-Regions: an innovative solution for the integrated sustainable development of rural areas. A performance and classification analysis application to the Italian "Biodistretto del Cilento"

ABSTRACT

Eco-Regions represent an innovative model of rural development, started in Italy in 2005. It is a bottom-up initiative involving organic farmers' associations, local governments and other local stakeholders; their goal is promoting sustainable development in rural areas by implementing a cluster of activities linked to the cultivation, processing and distribution of organic products. Similar initiatives are developing in different countries in the EU; Southern Mediterranean countries are showing a strong interest. In 2014 the INternational Network of Eco Regions (INNER) was created. One of the Network goals is to support the Eco Regions' development in compliance with their social and environmental principles. The need for defining more efficient governance and management models emerged. A specific analytical framework for their classification and performance monitoring is thus necessary. The goal of the present study is to contribute to the definition of this specific analytical framework and apply it to a case study in the "Biodistretto del Cilento" or Cilento Eco-Region, Italy. The framework integrates four different approaches: an adaptation of the Porters' Diamond analysis of the Industrial Clusters competitiveness; an evaluation scheme for measuring the degree of compliance of the Eco-Regions with their principles; a classification scheme of the Clusters' stage of development and a classification scheme for defining the Eco-Regions' market orientation typologies. The resulting set of indicators was measured using existing statistics and documents, integrated by a questionnaire administered to three experts representing the main stakeholders belonging to the Cilento Eco-Region, with whom the results were also discussed. This granted access to the primary and secondary data needed and supported the results' interpretation. Likert scales were used to measure the variables collected to allow for their integration in the different indicators. The results showed the approach capacity to provide useful information on the Eco-Region's performances and characteristics. The Eco-Region is at an *Initial* development stage but close to the *take -off*. Its relative small economic and technical size has so far constrained the full expression of the Eco-Region potential for growth. The leading role of organic farming in fostering a sustainable territorial transition emerged. The contribution to the Eco-Region competitiveness, provided by the high quality goods and services supplied, and by the local governments' support, is reduced by the lack of coherence and continuity between the different development initiatives. The compliance with the Eco-Regions' social and environmental values is high, the main problem being related to the still difficult inclusion of small farmers, given the relative expensive and complex access to organic certification schemes. The market orientation classification shows that the Cilento Eco-Region belongs to the type "*Local consumption-oriented Eco-Region, with prevailing demand coming from non-resident population (tourists)".* A recommended strategy is to encourage tourists' demand to increase the resources necessary to invest in the Eco-Region growth and integrated social and environmental development. Future researches should consider other approaches coming from the vast literature on Clusters and extending the study to other Eco-Regions in order to test the chosen variables capacity to effectively monitor the Eco-Regions' performances in different contexts.