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### ***The Organic Districts in Italy: a multi-level approach for the governance of farm sustainability in rural areas***

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#### **Abstract**

In the last decade, the Italian organic districts (Biodistretti in Italian) have been dramatically grown. So far, there are 26 organic districts, located in all Italian regions, covering a significant organic area and local economy (Rete Rurale Nazionale, 2017). The growing organic food consumption and organic farming are the driving forces of these initiatives, which are reported in many European countries (eg. France, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Czech Republic) (Schermer et al., 2015). In Veneto Region, three organic districts have been created in last three years and new ones are going to be promoted.

A organic district includes two terms: organic and district. The latter is well-known in the economics literature, going back to Marshall industrial districts in the 19th century, and in the agriculture economics one, where the district approach has been applied to agriculture and/or food production within a specific areas or territories (eg. rural districts, agrifood districts, supply chain districts, etc.). While the district approach in agriculture is focused on the territorial dimension of farming, its success or effectiveness in contributing to the rural development is often on debate.

The term organic gives to a district a different feature. Following the definition adopted by some Italian Regions (eg. Liguria) a organic district has two main features: the organic farming and typical productions, i.e., agricultural productions are strongly linked to the terroir (soil and climate, know-how, history and local traditions).

A organic district arises from the organic producers demand (bottom-up approach) while its framework is built by producers, consumers and institutions having a joint interest to protect the environment (and landscape), to maintain the sustainability, to enhance the value of local productions as well as to ensure the health of the environment.

Accordingly, the organic districts require the cooperation of municipalities and other institutions (eg. Local Action Groups, reclamation consortia, indication of origin consortia,

etc.) which should create a network supporting farms and generating an interface between the companies (farmers, processors, retailers, catering and restaurants, touristic activities) and local administrations in a framework of innovative governance.

The activities of organic districts, fixed by the partnerships among all stakeholders ( farmers, processors, institutions, associations, etc.), may range from collective promotion and communication of organic products, to the creation of a network supporting organic farms and/or producers or to improve the skills of producers or to the wine and food tourism.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the framework and relationships of the organic districts in Italy and the Veneto Region in order to define a method able to monitor and to manage them while considering their territorial similarities and differences.

Firstly, a comparative analysis has been carried out in order to evaluate the main features of district in agriculture respect to organic ones by assessing the spatial and business dimension, socioeconomic and policy dimensions (Toccacelli, 2015).

Secondly, a survey is done among Italian and, especially, Veneto organic districts in order to draw their framework (public and private operators, supply chains, competitiveness of organic farming,etc.) while evaluating their role in enhancing the rural development of territories.

**Keywords:** organic district, organic farming, governance, sustainability, territorial marketing