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The Different Strategies of the Italian Regions within the 2023 2027 Rural Development Programme

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Abstract: Following the European Commission's approval of the CAP Strategic Plan and the 21 Italian region (CSR)-related strategic documents, the financial aspect that characterized the single national CAP plan was made available. Here, we present and analyze the final data on the distribution of public resources for interventions between 2023 and 2027. This marks a pivotal period of strategic information for those who follow the evolution of the rural development policy, providing vital indications of policymakers' priorities. In Italy, where rural development policy is highly regionalized, it is difficult to acquire an overall view of the strategic choices adopted by the individual regions. The primary objective of this article is to offer a comprehensive and enlightening synopsis of the regional choices in the CSRs. It aims to identify shared strategic paths in rural development, with a specific focus on the financial allocation in each of the three historical macro-objectives of the CAP: the competitiveness of the agri-food sector, the protection of the environment, and the revitalization of rural areas. Cluster analysis classification allows for aggregating the strategies adopted, allowing for comparisons across the Italian regions. The results show three regional groups focused on environmental strategy, structural investment measures, and resource distribution that is more balanced between these two approaches. Identifying the strategic choices made by the regions allows policymakers to predict different development trajectories and the progress of the expenditure indicators over the years. At the moment, it is impossible to verify whether the policy mix defined in the budget allocation is consistent with the strategic statements.

Keywords: common agricultural policy; rural development; cluster analysis

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1. Introduction

This article considers three relevant changes in the new programming period of the Common Agricultural Policy for 2023–2027. The first concerns the creation of a single regulatory and procedural framework that combines the interventions and rules of the First Pillar (income support payments and eco-schemes, Common Market Organization) and those of the Second Pillar (rural development). The second change is that each member state must present this single framework with a detailed plan of interventions (PSP). The third refers to introducing a new evaluation method. This delivery model is intended to guide the writing of the national strategy and provide the targets and the methods or elements for evaluating their achievement. Failure to do so risks the penalty of losing resources. The EU objective reiterated in all the technical and regulatory documents supporting the new programming phase is quite straightforward, and to simplify, it further focuses on supporting agribusinesses, more fairness, and an orientation of resources towards ten new European objectives that underlie the rules of the new programming period. This article is not concerned with examining the merits or details of these choices and only concerns itself with examining how these changes have impacted the Italian CAP management system,

in which the First Pillar is governed by the State and the Second Pillar by the regions. In particular, the article focuses on rural development and the differences between the Italian regions regarding the importance of the various interventions that can be activated based on their allocated resources.

The preparation of the PSP Italia 2023–2027 required an extended consultation phase involving the regions and autonomous provinces, particularly for the rural development chapter. The aim was to ensure that planned interventions would address the diverse territorial needs and opportunities. MASAF (Ministero dell'Agricoltura, della Sovranità alimentare e delle Foreste—Ministry of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forestry) is the management authority for the PSP and is responsible for coordinating the regions, which, as regional management authorities, have the responsibility for managing rural development interventions through their regional planning document (CSR). The CSR is the primary implementation tool at the territorial level of the national and European programmatic frameworks and sets out the regional strategy for rural development and the regional specificities of the interventions.

To summarize, the Italian Regions' CSRs set out the interventions permitted through the National Strategic Plan, which are adapted to their territories' economic, social, and territorial specificities. Each program includes a selection of interventions identified within the overall framework outlined by the PSP and chosen according to their strategic directions in light of the need to concentrate resources towards the priority objectives and in compliance with the minimum spending constraints imposed by the EU.

This article investigates how the different regions have defined the regulatory contents and indications of the PSP in their territories. Each region has the role of defining, according to its specificities and priorities, the interventions envisaged by the National Strategic Plan, independently deciding the distribution of resources between interventions within the limits of the EU programming. The objective is to verify which tools the regional administrations have strategically adopted to support rural development through their CSR.

Clusters based on budget allocation define some precise homogeneous "policy shape." Indeed, some interventions appear more discriminating than others in explaining the different policy choices. Regulatory constraints limit the "degree of freedom" of the regions, although some of them voluntarily go beyond minimum commitments, highlighting specific policy choices.

In this article, we highlight how different Italian regions' choices can be classified into macro groups, which are very heterogeneous and differ significantly from the conventional macro geographical areas of the north, center, and south. The classification is made based on the distribution of the weighting given to the eight macro-categories of interventions:

1. Commitments regarding the environment and climate;
2. Natural or other specific territorial constraints;
3. Specific territorial disadvantages resulting from certain mandatory requirements;
4. Investments;
5. The establishment of young farmers and the start-up of rural businesses, including the establishment of new farmers;
6. Risk management tools;
7. Cooperation;
8. The exchange of knowledge and dissemination of information.

This article is organized as follows: Section two provides a literature review, which examines the strategic analysis of rural development policy and highlights the choices and toolboxes used by Member States and regions. Existing studies, cited in Section two, have often focused on strategic analyses of rural development within different Member States, also resorting to cluster analysis. However, most studies refer to past programming or do not address regional details, limiting themselves to proposing comparative analyses between Member States. This study attempts to fill the gap in the existing literature by

providing a simplified reading of the strategic choices made by individual regions in the context of rural development in the current 2023–2027 programming period.

The third section sets out the methodology. The following one describes the data and information collected for the analysis and the cluster analysis results against the composition of the financial plans. The final section discusses policies and conclusions. It explains how different strategies that the regions chose could affect public spending, either making financial progress faster or slower and risking the loss of resources. These strategies will also have an effect on agriculture by focusing on better environmental protection or improving global competitiveness.

2. Literature Review

The new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) 2023–2027 of the European Union marks a significant evolution compared to the previous framework (CAP 2014–2020). The 'new' CAP seeks to address the current and future challenges of European agriculture, focusing on environmental and social priorities and the economic resilience of the agricultural sector. As with the previous cycle, it is structured around two main pillars. Pillar I continues to support farmers' incomes through direct payments, though with a stronger emphasis on environmental standards through "conditionality" and the introduction of eco-schemes. These voluntary eco-schemes encourage sustainable agricultural practices and must account for at least 25% of the direct payments' budget in each Member State. Pillar II remains focused on rural development, funding long-term projects that promote sustainability, innovation, and the diversification of agricultural and rural activities. Key differences between the CAP programs for 2014–2020 and 2023–2027 include an expanded focus on environmental and climate sustainability, which reflects the European Green Deal and the 'Farm to Fork' strategy. While the earlier CAP introduced "greening" elements, the more recent CAP strengthens these environmental considerations by rewarding sustainable practices through eco-schemes. The 2023–2027 CAP also allows for greater flexibility, enabling Member States to tailor measures to their specific agricultural and environmental needs within a common European framework [1].

The large amount of literature on the key themes and perspectives related to the strategic analysis of rural development policy makes it difficult to provide a comprehensive review of this topic. The following paragraphs present a summary of the main contributions to the strategic evaluation of rural development policies, starting from the works carried out within a broader European context and then focusing on the most recent works on Italian strategic choices and explaining the value added of this work.

In general terms, there is an increasing focus within political institutions on evaluating their activities to better guide future political initiatives [2]. This is especially evident at the European level, where the Directorate General for Agriculture of the European Commission has long been engaged in evaluation procedures and technical analyses. These efforts aim to observe and, if necessary, adjust the implementation of the CAP. To foster a more open and participatory approach, there is also encouragement and support for the scientific community to conduct independent analyses and studies [3–6].

Evans, Lasen, and Tsey [7] provide a complete list of publications about the evaluation frameworks and methodologies used to understand the strategy of rural development interventions. Within this field of research, there is extensive literature related to comparative analysis across different areas. Comparative studies such as [8–11] offer insights into the effectiveness of different policy instruments across diverse rural contexts, mainly in Europe, helping policymakers understand the transferability of strategies and interventions.

An in-depth analysis of the toolboxes used by MSs under the Second Pillar of the 2014–2020 CAP is provided by [12], showing a predominance of spending on environmental measures and physical investments for competitiveness, while less funding is devoted to broader rural development. A whole assessment of the strategy has been performed [13], whose cluster analysis is the result of the choices that MSs made in the First Pillar (in terms of using the flexibility provided or maintaining the status quo) and the Second

Pillar (in terms of budget allocation). The study identifies five clusters, focusing on each group's relative importance to the general objectives of the CAP. Both contributions speak about the presence of a 'historic factor' to explain a considerable continuity in priorities and patterns in resource allocation, minimizing any changes in support provided to the agricultural sector.

Focusing on the analyses of rural development policies applied in Italy during the 2007–2013 programming period, Sotte et al. [14] proposed an essential contribution of comparative analysis through a qualitative and quantitative investigation of the implementation of the RDPs in the various Italian regions.

Sotte and Ripanti [15] provide a complete examination of the CAP at the beginning of the 2014–2020 programming period, focusing on its general framework relating to the entire European Union and how it would/could be applied to the highly regionalized Italian context. This work provided a valuable tool for understanding the detailed application of the CAP in the Italian context and, above all, with perfect timing, given the start of the 2014–2020 programming period.

There has been an extensive literature sector that has widely debated the application of the 2014–2020 CAP (see, among others, [16–19]). These authors analyze the rural development policy of 2014–2020, first explaining the objectives and priorities and then focusing on the menu of available tools and their different applications among the 21 RDPs of the Italian regions.

Finally, there are many analyses and publications regarding the ongoing 2023–2027 programming. However, here, the scope of the investigation is broader, focusing on the European context or comparisons between Member States. To the authors' knowledge, studies have yet to be carried out on the strategies adopted by individual Italian regions regarding the distribution of resources allocated to rural development.

Current research focuses mainly on analyzing the application of the changes contained in the CAP and in rural development at a European level [20–22].

In the Italian context, the work of Pierangeli et al. [23] can be cited, although it is limited to the effects of direct income support payments. The results highlight that the features of the new CAP imply a significant modification to the financial allocation at both farm and territorial levels. Cagliero et al. [24] provide a synoptic reading of MSs' choices in identifying shared strategic paths and national peculiarities. This analysis was realized by comparing the strategic statements against financial allocations, finding out that the strategic statements are sometimes inconsistent with the policy mix defined in the budget allocation by type of intervention.

However, few in-depth studies have been carried out in the Italian context, and even fewer have proposed a comparative analysis of regional strategic choices regarding the allocation of financial resources among the interventions defined within the rural development program. This study analyzes how the Italian regions have strategically allocated rural development resources and evaluates the different development strategies adopted. Thus, the study attempts to fill the gap in the literature and help politicians at the regional level better interpret their choices regarding rural development. The study could also provide a basis for reviewing the choices made regarding strategic resource allocation and could serve as a basis for future research in this direction.

3. Materials and Methods

This contribution is based on collecting and analyzing national (PSP) and regional (CSR) planning documents for all 21 Italian regions and autonomous provinces.

More concretely, using the classification adopted by the European Union, the regions have decided to distribute the overall resources assigned to them among the following macro-categories of interventions:

- interventions regarding environmental and climate commitments;
- interventions that compensate for the natural disadvantages of the mountains or other specific territorial constraints;

- investment interventions;
- interventions to encourage the establishment of young farmers;
- interventions for cooperation;
- interventions for the exchange of knowledge and the dissemination of information;
- interventions for technical assistance.

In turn, these macro-categories of interventions can be traced back to the three strategic macro-objectives that have always been pursued by rural development policy, which were formalized during the 2007–2013 programming cycle, as follows:

(1) Improve the agricultural sector's competitiveness. This objective, or axis as it has been called, groups together most of the so-called "structural" or "investment" measures to improve companies' economic performance.
(2) Enhance the environment and rural space through support for land management. This objective responds to the EU priorities of fighting climate change, promoting biodiversity and the quality of water resources, and reducing the risk or impact of natural disasters. The payments were, therefore, aimed at guaranteeing the provision of environmental services through the implementation of agri-environmental measures and, at the same time, preventing the abandonment of agricultural land through the payment of compensation aimed at compensating for natural disadvantages or deriving from environmental restrictions.
(3) Improve the quality of life in rural areas and promote the diversification of economic activities within them. The objective is to offer a lively rural space and contribute to the maintenance and improvement of the social and economic framework, particularly in the most remote rural areas facing the problem of depopulation. The measures of this axis concern the "diversification of the rural economy", the "improvement of the quality of life in rural areas", and "training, acquisition of skills and animation".

The following Table 1 better explains the correspondence between the six macro-categories of intervention of the 2023–2027 programming and the three macro-objectives of the CAP.

Table 1. Correspondence between 2023–2027 macro-categories and the macro-objectives of the CAP.

Macro-Objectives of the CAP	Macro-Categories of Programming Interventions 2023–2027
Improve the competitiveness of the agricultural sector	Investment interventions (cat. D); Interventions to encourage the establishment of young farmers (cat. E)
Enhance the environment and rural space through support for land management	Interventions regarding the environment and climate commitments (cat. A) or which compensate for the natural disadvantages of mountainous areas or other specific territorial constraints (cat. B)
Improve the quality of life in rural areas and promote the diversification of economic activities	Interventions for cooperation (cat. G)

Source: own elaboration.

In the 2023–2027 programming, the macro-categories of interventions envisaged for the exchange of knowledge, the dissemination of information, and interventions for technical assistance remain outside the scheme. Both goals are characterized by horizontal and transversal functions and are not directly or explicitly referred to in any of the three macro-objectives.

A cluster analysis was performed to identify patterns of similarity between regions based on their strategic choices in terms of macro-objectives, i.e., the percentage share of public resources programmed for each macro-objective. After calculating the Euclidean distances between the rows in the dataset, the number of clusters represented was chosen by

following the silhouette method [25]. All the analysis was performed through the Rstudio application within the R environment (version 4.3.3, R Core Team, 2023 A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing_. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria (https://www.R-project.org/, accessed on 10 September 2024). The aim was to estimate a strategic path of concentration/polarization of CSR financial allocation instead of proposing a more complex and articulated policy.

Coherence among strategic statements and budget allocations ought to be robust. The analysis of the financial allocation by type of intervention seems coherent with the strategic declarations made in the CSRs by each region. However, a deeper analysis of the coherence and consistency between the financial allocation by type of intervention and the strategic statements of each regional CSR is not the main aim of this article. This cannot be done considering that there is no prioritization of the strategic statement in the CSR and that the achievement of strategic results can be realized through different interventions under the CAP toolbox, such as direct payments, market measures, and national instruments. Despite these limitations, the analysis provides interesting and valuable evidence for an ex ante evaluation of the programming phase at the national level.

Cluster analysis was chosen to group regional strategies for several reasons.

First, cluster analysis simplifies complex and diverse information into homogeneous groups, making data interpretation and regional comparisons easier. This is particularly useful in agricultural policy, where regional differences can be significant and affect the effectiveness of policies.

Second, this method significantly contributes to the research goals by giving policymakers a deeper understanding of the resource efficiency of different regional strategies.

Finally, cluster analysis ensures an objective and quantitative approach to aggregating regions, reducing the risk of subjective bias in categorization and providing a solid foundation for further comparative analysis.

This work aims to be the first contribution to stimulating the debate around regional strategic choices. As soon as all the target indicators are available, a deeper analysis will be undertaken, including coherence and consistency with the CSR's strategic statements.

4. Results and Discussion

The public resources available to the regions for the 2023–2027 Rural Development Policy total approximately 16 billion Euros. As mentioned and shown in Table 2, each region independently chooses where to allocate the resources based on its strategic choices within certain predefined parameters that oblige regions to allocate a minimum percentage of financial resources to specific objectives: at least 35% of the budget must be allocated to achieve environmental and climate goals, and at least 5% of EAFRD resources must be assigned to the LEADER approach for developing rural territories. However, our results show how some regions have voluntarily exceeded these minimum commitments.

The interventions regarding the environment and climate commitments (SRA) promote the introduction and maintenance of agricultural practices with low environmental impact, using production models that make more sustainable use of resources. They encourage sustainable activities that help to protect the quality of water and agricultural soils, safeguard biodiversity, enhance the farm landscape, and conserve native animal breeds that are at threat of abandonment. Category A interventions in many regions are strategic since they absorb at least 40% of the total resources available. Among the interventions in group A, those relating to organic production and animal welfare often attract the largest share of public resources.

Category B interventions relate to natural or other territorial constraints, identified by the acronym SRB. These favor the maintenance of agricultural and livestock activity in mountain areas and areas with significant and specific natural constraints. These interventions compensate for the loss of earnings and additional costs incurred by farmers for carrying out agricultural and livestock activities compared to areas not subject to natural

disadvantages. As can be seen from the table, SRB interventions are significant financially in a large number of regions.

Table 2. Planned public expenditure by macro-category of interventions by regions (in % of total resources).

Regions	Interventions Regarding the Environment and Climate Commitments (Cat. A)	Interventions that Compensate for the Natural Disadvantages of the Mountains or Other Specific Territorial Constraints (Cat. B)	Investment Interventions (Cat. D)	Interventions to Encourage the Establishment of Young Farmers (Cat. E)	Interventions for Cooperation (Cat. G)
Valle D'Aosta	35.46	33.64	17.69	1.09	8.43
Piemonte	34.17	5.71	35.46	5.68	12.18
Liguria	17.12	5.2	54.75	8.4	8.36
Lombardia	24.08	10.19	45.3	4.41	10.15
P.A. Bolzano	39.36	35.86	11.16	6.62	6.49
P.A. Trento	21.94	25.13	35.93	6.07	7.36
Veneto	25.94	10.91	38.1	8.56	9.93
Friuli Venezia Giulia	34.14	10.98	37.35	5.27	7.07
Emilia Romagna	35.75	11.17	30.89	6.77	10.32
Toscana	40.61	6.01	33.51	5.94	10.28
Umbria	31.44	6.07	40.63	2.51	14.61
Marche	34.75	11.49	34.08	3.53	10.45
Lazio	33.47	8.73	27.54	10.44	14.22
Abruzzo	38.17	12.42	27.1	7.34	8.99
Molise	36.27	18.63	27.14	5.07	5
Campania	37.47	15.62	28.85	2.33	12.14
Puglia	36.18	1.27	40.48	4.22	13.14
Basilicata	31.96	9.93	35.85	8.17	9.64
Calabria	45.74	0.38	35.69	5.12	8.85
Sicilia	42.28	15.7	25.98	6.78	7.05
Sardegna	39.88	20.26	26.24	4.88	7.64
Italia	28.9	8.92	27.04	4.61	8.28

Source: own elaboration based on National Rural Network data.

The interventions of categories A and B, in line with the methodology adopted and responding to the same general environmental climate objective, are aggregated in our calculations for the cluster analysis. In some regions, the sum of the resources dedicated to these two types of interventions reaches a considerable proportion of the entire available financial allocation. Since these interventions are annual payments, they allow for the easy advancement of spending and, therefore, positive financial advancement performances, a pertinent aspect regarding the return of the 'n + 2 rule', which forces resources to be spent within the two years following the moment of commitment. On the other hand, the absorption of such a significant portion of resources reduces the resources available for structural interventions, such as investments or territorial development. These are characterized by greater complexity and longer payment processes but are necessary to

guarantee more significant and lasting competitiveness to the agricultural sector and rural areas in general [26].

Type D interventions, identified by the acronym SRD, aim to enhance the competitiveness of agricultural farms and rural businesses that transform and market agricultural products. Other support for investments by agricultural farms oriented on non-agricultural activities allows them to increase their income following a multifunctional approach and also contributes to counteracting rural area depopulation, as well as strengthening basic rural infrastructure [27,28]. SRD interventions also include productive and non-productive investments in forests and forest damage prevention and restoration.

The financial resources that the individual regions have allocated for type D interventions vary significantly from the Italian average of 27%. In some cases, such as Liguria, Umbria, and Puglia, these allocations are significant. In others, such as Valle D'Aosta, Bolzano, and Sardinia, the priority given to investment measures is far lower than the national average. Most of the total resources within this category are allocated to the SRD01—Agricultural Productive Investments for the Competitiveness of Agricultural Companies intervention (corresponding to the former Measure 4.1 of the PSR 2014–2022). Other interventions within this category often receive an insignificant and, in some cases, negligible financial allocation.

Category E concerns resources reserved for supporting the establishment of young and new farmers and the start-up of rural businesses. Most regions (11 out of 21) have only used this allocation for the purpose of settling young farmers. On average, this category only accounts for 4.6% of the total budget. As in the previous instance, there is a high degree of variability in the weight of allocations between Italy's 21 regions. Four regions—Campania, Marche, Umbria, and Valle D'Aosta—allocate less than 4% of their total budget to this category. Lazio, on the other hand, sees a solid strategic value to such interventions, committing over 10% of its entire financial allocation. According to [29,30], there is no clear relationship between the percentage of young farmers in these regions and the allocation of financial resources to young farmers. Regions such as Marche and Umbria, for example, have few young farmers but also offer very low financial support to encourage the establishment of young farmers. The structural nature of this category of interventions means that they can be associated with the previous category, which is dedicated to investments. There is extensive literature demonstrating the strong correlation between the presence or permanence of young people in rural areas and the vitality not only of the agricultural sector but of the territories in general, thanks to young peoples' greater propensity for innovation and entrepreneurial growth [31–33].

SRG interventions to support cooperation contribute to supporting the Operational Groups of the European Partnership for Innovation in Agriculture (PEI AGRI), the protection of the quality of agri-food production, and the LEADER rural development strategies. Almost all of the resources allocated to type G interventions are absorbed by intervention SRG06—Implementation of local development strategies used to finance the local development plans of the LEADER groups. For this reason, the category of SRG interventions can be considered as a response to the macro-objective of improving the quality of life in rural areas and promoting the diversification of economic activities.

The results of the cluster analysis are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

The analysis identified three main aggregations apart from the Liguria region, which appears to be an outlier. The clustering reflected the three main strategic choices adopted by the regions regarding the distribution of resources. The first group of regions has favored environmental interventions, reserving residual resources for other intervention categories. Valle D'Aosta and Bolzano are the most environmentally oriented, but Sardinia, Sicily, Molise, Campania, and Abruzzo are also included in this cluster. These regions voluntarily go beyond the proscribed minimum commitments, and the budget that they have allocated to the environment is above the minimum threshold.

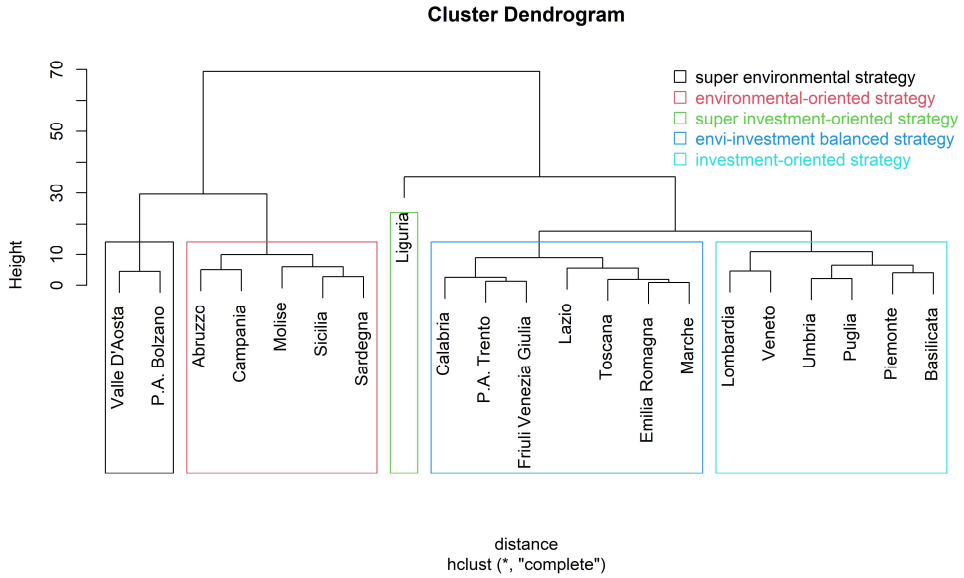

Figure 1. Cluster dendrogram.

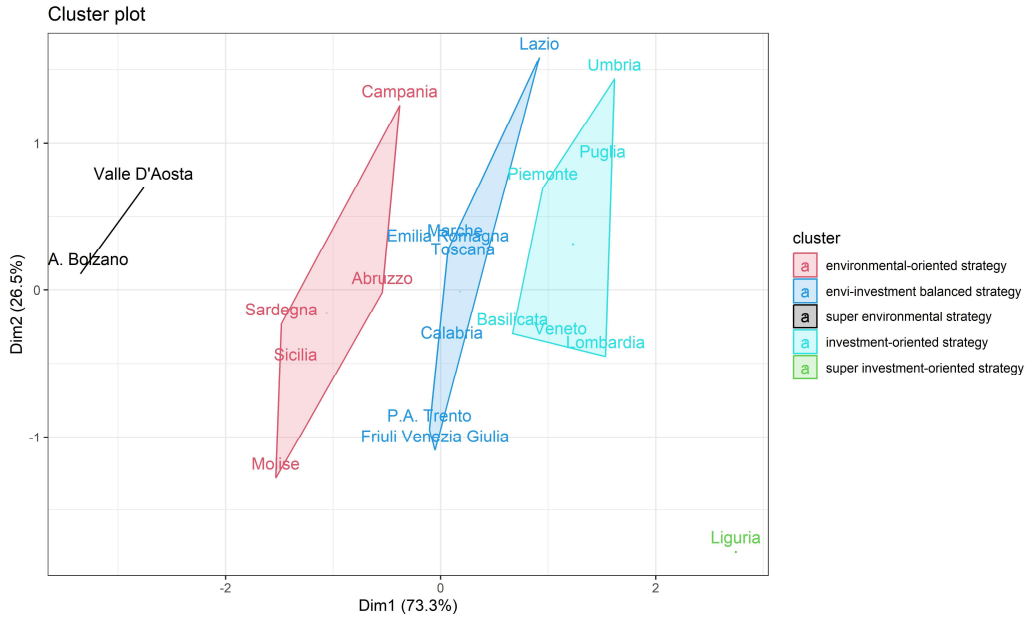

Figure 2. Cluster plot.

A second group of regions favors structural interventions, dedicating a considerable share of their planned resources to this category. Lombardy, Veneto, Basilicata, Umbria, and Puglia fall within this group, which focuses on strengthening the sector's competitiveness. The Liguria region deserves special mention, as the resources it dedicates to structural interventions are of a very high magnitude, making them unique within this aggregation.

Finally, a third group of regions is characterized by a more balanced and less differentiated distribution of resources between the different categories. Within this group, regions such as Lazio, Marche, Emilia Romagna, and Tuscany dedicate a higher budgetary allocation to LEADER than is minimally required.

An aspect worth underlining is that the strategic choices made by the regions do not respond to the logic of territorial distribution (Figure 3). The cluster analysis results do not reflect the traditional distributions of the regions by geographical areas (north, center, south, and islands). Each cluster contains regions from within these different geographical areas.

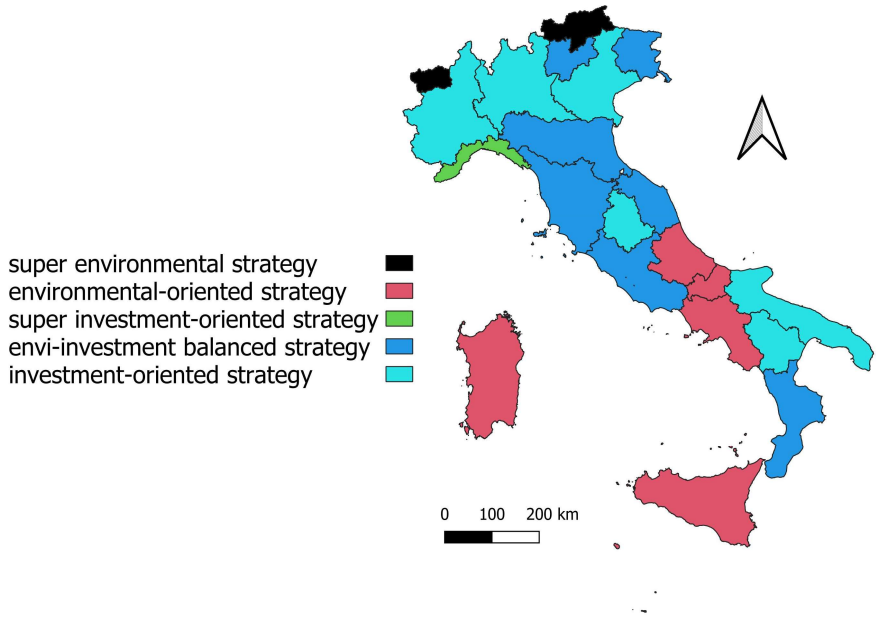

Figure 3. Region aggregation in cluster analysis.

It is extremely difficult to hypothesize the reasons behind this type of aggregation relating to the regions' strategic choices over the distribution of rural development resources. Each region has been influenced in its strategic decisions by a diversity of factors that are undoubtedly related to the needs and requirements of the territorial context and the influence of various actors. The clusters we have identified may well be influenced by exogenous factors: political relations between (and within) the regions, the technical assistance services used in determining the allocations, pressures from various stakeholders, and the technical capacities of the various administrative machineries within different regions.

Awareness of the strategic choices made by different regions can allow policymakers to predict different development trajectories and the progress of the expenditure indicators over the years. This is a first step for a broader discussion of the results and the effects of the 2023–2027 CAP. The international literature on the results achieved by the current CAP is still underdeveloped due to delays in the implementation of its measures. However, a few first experiences and studies from various EU countries provide some initial understanding of the initial impacts of the policy, mostly related to the eco-schemes and environmental measures, which, it has been argued, could have been used more consistently and effectively [34].

In the Netherlands, the focus on eco-schemes has led to a significant emphasis on sustainable agricultural practices. Dutch farmers are adopting eco-schemes to move towards greener practices, focusing on biodiversity enhancement and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, the early implementation challenges have included aligning these eco-schemes with the specific needs of diverse (and often intense) farming systems within the country [35].

Germany has also begun implementing eco-schemes, but early assessments indicate that there is still room for improvement. While Germany has introduced various eco-schemes to reduce nutrient losses and promote biodiversity, the initial roll-out has faced some difficulties. Specifically, there are concerns about the level of ambition in the German CAP Strategic Plan, particularly regarding the allocation of budget towards eco-schemes and the effectiveness of certain environmental measures [36].

Finally, Poland's experience with the 2023–2027 CAP also highlights challenges and opportunities. Early assessments suggest that Poland's CAP Strategic Plan may not fully address the country's environmental needs. The implementation of eco-schemes and rural development measures has faced some hurdles, particularly in achieving the desired

outcomes for climate and biodiversity goals. There is ongoing discussion about refining these measures to ensure better alignment with environmental objectives [37].

5. Conclusions

With the 2023–2027 CAP, Italy was called to prepare its own Strategic Plans (PSP) by developing a single programming document, which includes all the instruments of the CAP previously contained in various strategic documents.

In this way, the EU has strengthened the flexibility granted to individual countries (or regions within countries) by rebalancing responsibilities between the EU and Member States, allowing the latter to pay greater attention to local specificities based on a timely analysis of needs.

Italy has, therefore, been able to develop its intervention strategy with significant margins of freedom while remaining within a framework of specific common objectives, greater environmental ambition, minimum spending levels for different targets, and a range of general predefined intervention typologies.

In turn, Italy, albeit within the scope of the single strategic document, has tried to guarantee the decision-making autonomy of its regions regarding rural development. Each region has chosen which rural development interventions to activate and prioritize within the scope of its own rural development strategy. Other countries, such as Spain and Portugal, have also regionalized their rural development strategies, combining national and regional elements in their CAP Strategic Plans and recognizing the diverse agricultural and environmental needs and opportunities facing their different rural regions [38].

This approach, which gives broad respect to the principle of subsidiarity, which helps to protect local specificities, also implies a very heterogeneous implementation of the 2023–2027 CAP, both between and within Member States, especially those with regionalized programming, such as Italy.

In this article, we provide a synoptic reading of regional choices concerning rural development, identifying some common strategic paths based on the financial allocation of Second Pillar funding made by each Italian region.

The strategic choices made by the regions in terms of interventions distributed were defined using the cluster analysis technique, which made it possible to aggregate regions that made similar choices and identify three prevalent strategic trajectories.

According to our classification, the first group of regions has decidedly focused on an environmental strategy, committing up to over 75% of the total resources to this. A second group of regions favors structural investment measures, dedicating the minimum resources needed to satisfy the regulatory requirements for other types of intervention. A third group of regions is characterized by a strategy of balanced resource distribution between the several intervention categories.

These strategic choices made by the regions will inevitably influence future rural development trajectories and will probably also influence the progress of expenditure indicators over the years. It is difficult to identify any common underlying factors between regions that have adopted the same strategy as there are too many variables to consider. This, however, could undoubtedly be the subject of future research.

According to Ottaviani and Cuozzo [26], the environmental interventions in the 2014–2020 programming, which are easier to implement, record a positive spending trend corresponding to the expectations expressed when resources were allocated to the intervention. Conversely, structural interventions, especially investments in tangible fixed assets, are difficult to implement and often face delays.

The regions that have strategically chosen to commit themselves to prioritizing structural interventions for the 2023–2027 period will, therefore, have to work to ensure faster spending, timely progress, and the achievement of their objectives. This concern is more felt due to the shift in expense reporting within the current programming period: it moves from the calendar year to the financial year, i.e., from 16 October of year N to 15 October of year N + 1. An equally critical change is the transition from the N + 3 disengagement

rule to the N + 2 rule, which means there will be one year less to reach the annual spending target, risking returning the resources to the European Union.

The situation becomes even more difficult considering the two programs have tended to overlap in recent years, increasing the need for regions to spend their allocations in a timely manner. In other words, the regions must start spending now on the new 2023–2027 PSP programming to avoid disengagement in 2025 and the N + 3 disengagement on the 2014–2022 PSR funds.

In addition to the above considerations, it must be strongly emphasized that such a context requires new skills, knowledge, and behavior from the human capital involved. Multidisciplinary skills and strategic behavior will determine the success or failure of the program. The theoretical implication in this is the need to frame the problem within a broad scientific approach to rural studies in which modern analysis tools, such as the one used, make it possible to analyze in depth the needs and related choices and, above all, to monitor, interpret, and compare the results achieved.

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