

A critical analysis of the long-term impact (1936-2015) of grazing management on Land Degradation in a marginal, rural community of Southern Italy

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Unsustainable grazing, one of the most diffused problem in land management at the global scale, is considered as a serious pressure on natural landscapes. Particularly in the Mediterranean agroforestry landscapes, unsustainable grazing is regarded as a key factor of degradation processes, mostly determined and exacerbated by evolving socioeconomic and environmental conditions at the local scale, revised agricultural policies and changing international market scenario. The Common Agricultural Policy set at the European level plays a powerful and twofold role in shaping the dynamics at local level. Measures adopted for Less Favoured Areas, for example, have stimulated grazing intensification based on financial supports whose effectiveness is shaped by the socioeconomic local context. At the same time, pasture-based livestock farming systems are considered priority habitats preserving traditional and high natural value farmlands in Mediterranean Europe. A sustainable management of pastures may also contribute to limit soil erosion and to mitigate land degradation.

This paper critically analyses the drivers of change and the challenges facing a Mediterranean upland pastoralist systems in Southern Italy along a period of almost 80 years (1936-2015). The detailed case study highlights the linkages between the evolution of landscape, grazing management, locally adapted animal breeds and social capital.

Historical forest maps, aerial imagery and satellite data at different spatial resolutions have been used to trace land use trajectories occurred during the investigated period within the study area.

The integration in a GIS environment of the obtained results with diachronic detailed farm management surveys and semi-structured interviews, shows a strong link between land use changes and economic performances mainly connected to policy orientation.

Along the time period considered, different adaptation strategies adopted by local actors are analysed leading to the present situation where, in the search for economic viability (and social acceptance) many are left with the stark choice of intensification or abandonment. In doing so, the paper shows how, in some circumstances, the interplay of local and supra-local forces produces an imbalance both in economic and environmental sense, ultimately meeting neither market demands nor ecosystem services. The paper ends with a recommendation for more targeted, evidence-based support for grazing farmland, along with better integration in the wider rural economy, if these farming practices are to survive into the future and if the EU is to meet its 2020 targets.

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