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Local Communities and the Management of Rural and Natural Resources in the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park"

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KEYWORDS

local communities
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"Mediterranean Diet"
Cilento
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ABSTRACT

To contribute to the overall environmental and socio-economic rebalancing of Italy, the paper proposes to identify policies, strategies and tools useful to local communities that intend to pursue the valorisation of Campania's inland protected areas. Starting from an in-depth analysis of the territories using the territorial method, from listening to the positions of the local communities that inhabit them, from the use of the SWOT tool adapted to the particular needs of the areas analysed and from the examination of good practices, the paper intends to contribute to the definition of plan scenarios capable of supporting the bodies in charge of planning and managing protected natural areas. The final objective is to contribute to the preparation of scenarios able to enhance the regions' considerable potential, both material and immaterial, and to pursue sustainable development. Particular attention has been paid to the relationship between local communities and the territory in small towns, where important sustainable development processes are being launched to reconcile the reconstitution of "natural capital" with the conservation of rural landscapes. Protected natural areas were considered the territorial laboratories where, through the promotion of the "Mediterranean Diet", local communities, protecting biodiversity, improving the quality of raw materials, agro-livestock, fish and forestry supply chains and the environment, by establishing Bio-Districts.

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1. Introduction

Over the last ten years, inland areas have become a central topic in European policy planning, with specific actions dedicated to this issue to overcome the gap recorded between 1950 and 2000. Most of Europe's land area is sparsely urbanised, with a significant and scattered population of close to 50%, especially in Eastern European countries [1-4].

A significant part of the inner regions consists of predominantly rural areas, as can be seen in Figure 1.

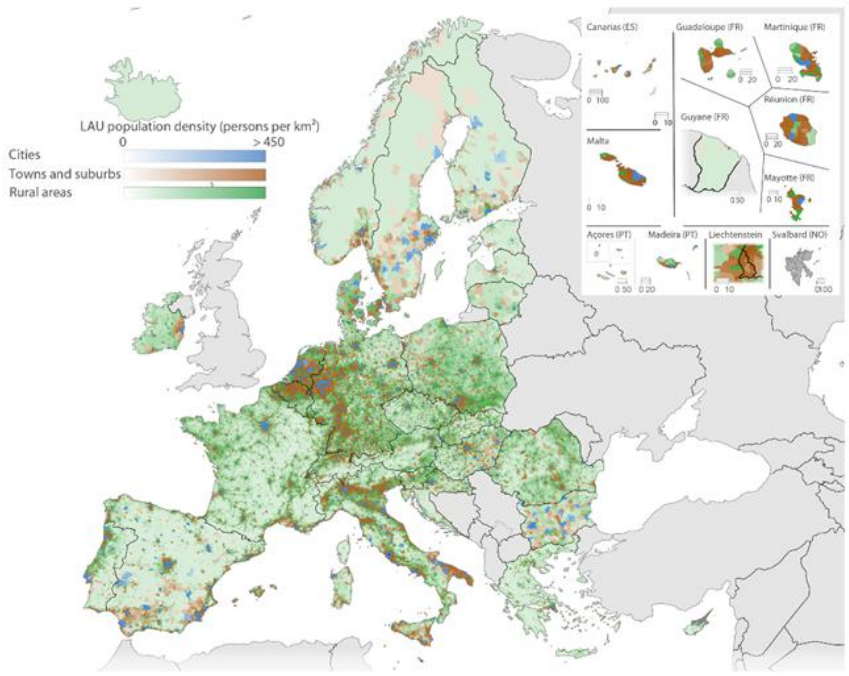

Figure 1. Degree of urbanisation in Union Europe (2021). Source Eurostat (based on Census Population Grid 2021 and Local Administrative Units 2021).

The percentage of the population living in rural areas, as shown in Figure 2 and Table 1, shows how unequal it is across a big part of Europe. In some large areas, the percentage of the rural population is lower, while in other smaller areas, the percentage of the rural population is higher.

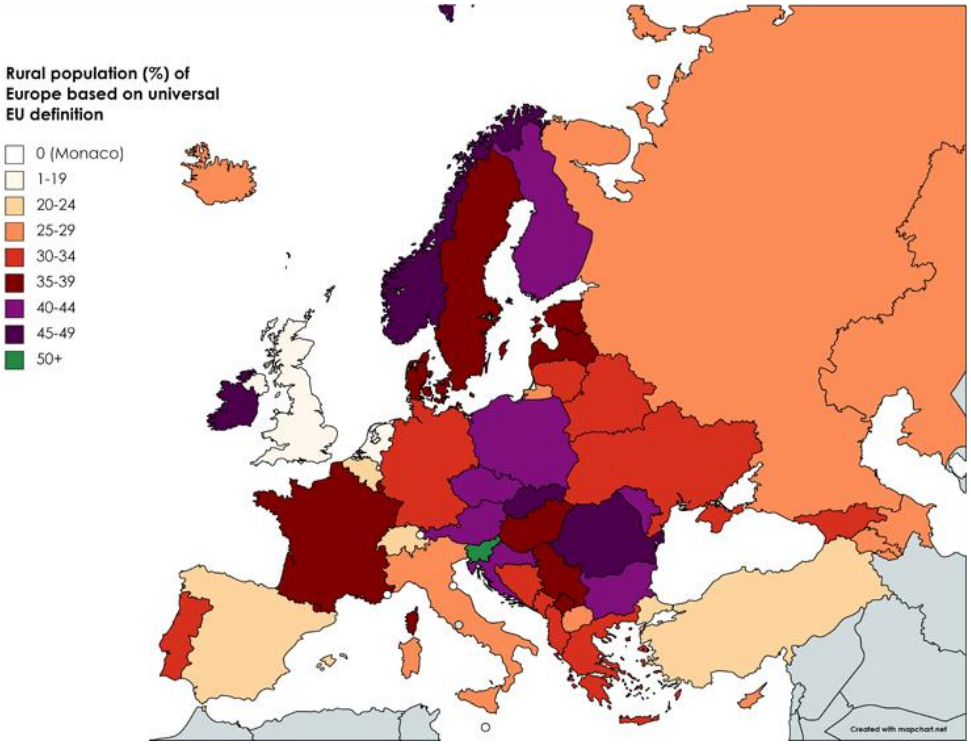

Figure 2. Rural population (%) of Europe based on universal EU definition (Source the chart, https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/pm5e2r/rural_population_of_european_countries_based_on/#lightbox, accessed 3 September 2025)

Table 1. Global rank of rural population percent, 2023 in Europe https://www.theglobal-economy.com/rankings/rural_population_percent/Europe/ (accessed 5 September 2025).

Countries	Rural population, percent, 2023
Liechtenstein	85.38
Faroe Isl.	57.01
Moldova	56.63
Bosnia & Herz.	49.73
Slovakia	45.97
Romania	45.33
Slovenia	43.91
Serbia	42.89
Croatia	41.42
North Macedonia	40.52
Austria	40.47
Poland	39.78
Ireland	35.53
Albania	35.40
Cyprus	33.01
Portugal	32.09
Montenegro	31.50
Latvia	31.33
Lithuania	31.31
Estonia	30.19
Ukraine	29.91
Italy	28.03
Hungary	27.14
Switzerland	25.80
Czechia	25.45
Russia	24.67
Bulgaria	23.30
Turkey	22.54
Germany	22.24
Greece	19.33
Belarus	19.27
Spain	18.45
France	18.22
Norway	16.00
UK	15.36
Finland	14.23
Andorra	12.23
Denmark	11.51
Sweden	11.26
Luxembourg	7.92
Netherlands	6.82
Iceland	5.96
Malta	5.06
San Marino	2.16
Belgium	1.81
Gibraltar	0.00
Monaco	0.00

The article examines recent changes in territorial governance, with reference to the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park (Italy). Strategies have been devised to support rural areas to preserve local communities and promote development processes that ensure lifestyles more consistent with changing socio-economic needs and employment opportunities [5]. In rural areas, one of the most pressing problems is certainly the impact of contemporary methods and techniques of food production, both plant and animal, which generally do not follow the rhythms of nature. These methods cause considerable damage to the environment, the landscape and the economic, social and cultural balance, as well as to the identity of local communities [6,7]. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, European countries have had to come up with concrete responses to support rural economies, local communities and the process of agricultural development in a sustainable approach, allocating considerable resources to the ecological transition. In this context, the sustainable rural development model confirms the crucial role of the spread of organic farming [8]. The first operational phase, promoted by European Union countries in 2020, fixed the target of achieving 25% of the agricultural area used in Europe with organic farming by 2030.

At the end of 2022, over 18.5 million hectares of biological agricultural land were managed biologically, under the supervision of over 480,000 producers (Table 2).

Table 2. Development of organic farming areas in Europe (2019-2022).

Countries	2019 in ha	2020 in ha	2021 in ha	2022 in ha (ca)	% UAA total
Italy	1.993.225	2.095.380	2.186.570	2.300.000	17,40
Spain	2.354.916	2.437.891	2.437.891	2.700.000	10,50
France	2.279.360	2.547.429	2.776.799	2.900.000	10,00
Germany	1.290.839	1.590.962	1.590.962		9,50
Austria	671.703	n.d.	n.d.		25,20

Source: Elaboration by Antonio Bertini on data source: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/data/database?etrans=it [10].

In Europe, organic farming represented 3.7% of the agricultural area. Biological farming land increased by more than 0.2 million hectares in Europe and 0.8 million hectares in the European Union compared to 2021. The countries leading in terms of biological agricultural area were France (2.9 million hectares), Spain (2.7 million hectares) and Italy (2.3 million hectares). In particular16 countries had at least 10% of their agricultural land dedicated to biological practices, with Liechtenstein leading the way with 43.0%, followed by Austria (27.5%) and Estonia (23.4%).

Biological agriculture has a reduced environmental impact because it uses natural processes and substances, promoting biodiversity, improving soil fertility, preserving regional ecological balances and reducing the use of chemical inputs such as synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. For biological agriculture to become an important component in the achievement of sustainability, the Mediterranean diet plays a strategic role, as it avoids the excessive exploitation of natural resources, such as soil and water, and contributes to a sustainable production system over time, with tangible benefits. The “Mediterranean diet” should be a real paradigm change in the Mediterranean context, starting with the reorganisation of the territory, the environment and social relations resulting from the traditional cultivation of food products and livestock farming in line with the Regulation (UE) 2024/1991 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2024 [9]. Human presence and activities carried out in the area are fundamental to the socio-economic organisation of the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park. This phenomenon is not limited to land cultivation methods, but extends to social aspects and affects settlement patterns, land ownership organisation, infrastructure and the whole landscape [10]. This is the theme on which the article is based and on which the authors have examined the main aspects and most important repercussions in considerable detail.

2. Methods

2.1. Dimensional Characteristics of Intermediate Areas

With Constitutional Law No. 1 of 2022, Article 9 of the Italian Constitution [11] was amended to include the protection of the environment, biodiversity and ecosystems, as well as the landscape and historical and artistic heritage, and the recognition of animal protection. Through this approach, which must now be put into practice through systemic planning, the landscape as a product of the interaction between nature and culture becomes the most immediate and effective way to protect the territory [12]. A further impulse and support for Italy's sustainability strategies and policies was given by the approval of the National Strategy for Sustainable Development by the Interministerial Committee for Economic Planning (CIPE) [13], which defines the guidelines for economic, social and environmental policies aimed at achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, Law No. 221 of 28/12/2015, with regulations on environmental matters aimed at promoting green economic measures and controlling the excessive use of natural resources, gave a major boost to the formation of Bio-districts (Figures 3 and 4, Table 3). Figure 3 shows the territorial distribution of biological areas in Italy, while Figure 4 highlights the regional distribution of biological operators in Italy in 2022. Italy is the leading country in the European Union in terms of expenditure on biodiversity and landscape protection (€2.1 billion in 2019, compared to €2 billion in France and €1.8 billion in Germany).

Figure 3. Regional distribution in hectares of organic land in Italy in 2022 (source: National Organic Farming System (Sinab) analysis of data from control organisations).

Figure 4. Territorial distribution of organic operators in Italy in 2022 (source: Processing by the National Organic Farming System (Sinab) based on data from Control Organisms, Regional Administrations and Sib.

2.2. National Park of Cilento, Vallo di Diano e Alburni

The National Park of Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni (Figure 5) is the second largest protected park in Italy. It extends from the Tyrrhenian coast, with the two protected marine areas of 'Santa Maria di Castellabate' and 'Costa degli Infreschi e della Masseta', to the foothills of the Campania and Lucania Apennines, and includes the peaks of Mount Alburni, Mount Gelbison, the coastal foothills of Mount Bulgheria and Mount Stella, and Campania's highest peak of Mount Cervati. The naturalistic richness of the heterogeneous territory goes hand in hand with the character of a land rich in history and culture. The National Park of Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site (1998) with the archaeological sites of Paestum and Elea (Velia in Roman times) and the Carthusian monastery of San Lorenzo in Padula, as well as numerous ancient towns and villages, evidence of the presence of different civilisations over the centuries. The park is home to a wide range of natural habitats, from mountains to coasts, with a great variety of flora and fauna, many of which are endemic to the region [14-16]. The Cilento and Vallo di Diano National Park (Figure 5) has been recognised as a MAB Biosphere Reserve (1997) and a Unesco Geopark (2010) for its high concentration of biodiversity and numerous natural caves both inland and along the coast, formed thanks to the karstic nature of the terrain. Notable and characteristic is the presence of small and medium-sized towns. If we exclude Agropoli, which can be considered a small town, numbering just over 20,000, all the other centres do not reach ten thousand inhabitants, and more than half do not even reach 5,000. Although very small, many of these have an interesting history with evidence that can still be discerned. Almost all have a historic centre, a place from which the urban reality originated, with the architecture of a certain interest that, together with the material and immaterial identity elements, is also a tourist destination [17,18]. This aspect also in Cilento, as in all the inland areas of Italy, must not be overlooked at all, since in the centres of central and northern Italy it has been a strong element for rebirth and can become fundamental for enhancing the centers of southern Italy as well, especially the more inner and hidden ones such as

those that are part of the Cilento Bio-District. Another important and interesting element is the history of the 'Mediterranean Diet' [19-21], which was born in these very places, deeply rooted in this land, when it was included in the list of UNESCO's Intangible Heritage sites.

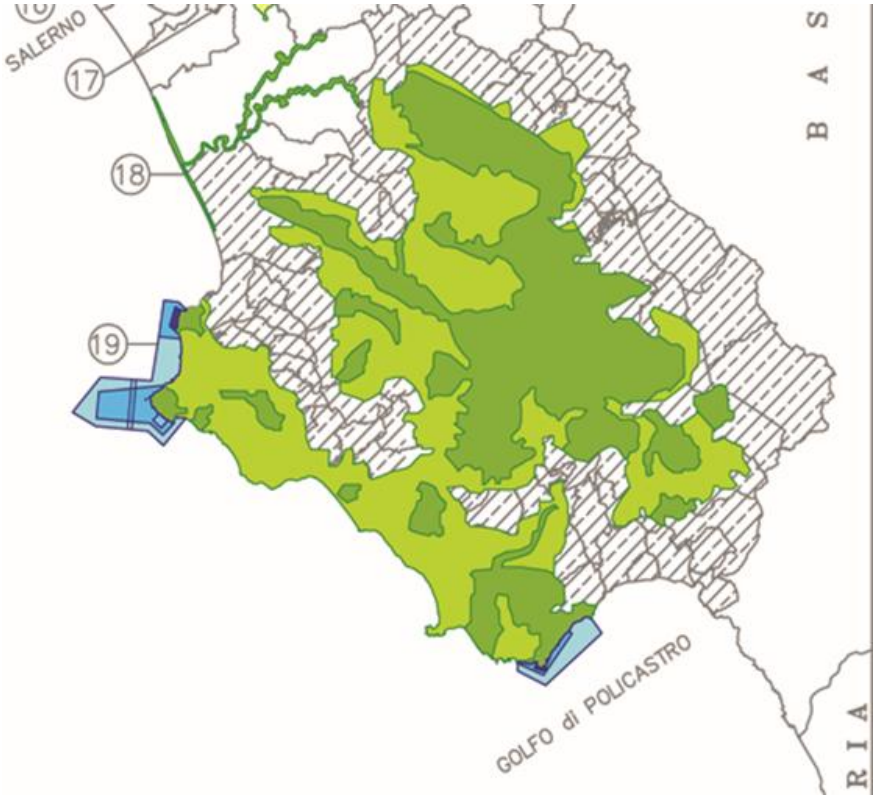

Figure 5. Area of the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park. The map shows the area of the Terrestrial Park in green, the Marine Protected Areas in light blue, with No. 19, Santa Maria di Castellabate and the Gulf of Policastro 'Costa degli Infreschi e della Masseta'. The outlined area is the contiguous area of the Terrestrial Park. (Source: elaboration by A. Bertini, S. Scapin, M. Maione, on data Ministero dell'Ambiente e Della Tutela Del Territorio e del Mare, anno 2013).

2.3. The "Mediterranean Diet" and the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park.

The Mediterranean Diet is a very important part of Mediterranean identity, starting with the transformation of the landscape, the environment, and social relations linked to the cultivation and consumption of agri-food products and livestock farming using traditional methods. The preservation of foods, cultivation techniques and product processing methods allows for the protection of biodiversity, but also the variety of cultures and, therefore, landscapes. By promoting organic farming and good agronomic practices, which allow for the protection of resources in terms of quality and quantity, the good quality of the land and soil fertility are guaranteed, and carbon emissions are reduced. The use of cultivation techniques that respect the morphology of the territory improves agricultural production in the inaccessible areas of the Italian Apennines. In particular, "The art of dry stone walling" [22], defined as "The art of dry stone construction, knowledge and techniques", is included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List as a transnational element of eight countries. It is an ancient practice, one of the most important and recognised in the field of naturalistic engineering. The latter is a technique that uses living plants and other natural materials, such as timber and stone, to carry out consolidation, stabilisation and protection works on embankments, slopes and watercourses, combating land degradation and hydrogeological instability [23,24]. The Mediterranean Diet, the art of dry stone walling, naturalistic engineering techniques, and

the conservation and enhancement of protected areas are all part of the same system. They are essential components in pursuing the goal of our civilisation, which is sustainability and the wise use of resources while respecting the environment and the common good. The Mediterranean landscape found in the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park is the expression and synthesis of thousands of years of agricultural practices from various cultures. The cultivation techniques introduced by Islamic culture profoundly changed the agronomy and production of the Mediterranean triad of cereals, vines and olive trees, introducing new crops and intensive practices – biennial or triennial rotation – and the spread of irrigation itself. The landscape of the 'Mediterranean Diet' has a field where not two, but three herbaceous crops are associated: cereals, fodder plants and renewal plants – vines – and the supporting tree, in the case of mixed crops, but vines can also be associated with peach, almond, fig, walnut and olive trees [25]. The agrosystem corresponds to the founding structure of the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park, to the socio-economic organisation of the territory aimed at the agricultural use of environmental resources. This phenomenon is not limited to land cultivation methods, but extends to social aspects and affects settlement systems, land ownership organisation, infrastructure and the overall appearance of the landscape [26] Finally, it should be remembered that excessive pressure on the territory hurts agricultural profitability, as climate change leads to droughts and sudden heavy rainfall, which affect productivity and the safety of places and communities. Southern Italy, in this context, has a higher territorial concentration of protected areas than the national average, which in turn is higher than the European average. Most of these areas are in inner areas that, after decades of neglect, have, in recent years, been the focus of attention by implementing a national enhancement strategy [27]. These are territories that do not escape the consolidated trends throughout Europe of demographic desertification and population ageing, with a prevalent outflow of young people, leading to a loss of human capital that is useful and necessary to guarantee self-propulsive local development processes. In this context, parks are confirmed as important territorial laboratories where it is possible to combine constraining regimes with new forms of eco-sustainable economy, mainly made up of tourism, agrifood and typical local production [28]. Protected areas, therefore, in addition to being a target for intervention, represent a possible driver on which to build an action strategy for Southern Italy. In this context, one of the most shareable approaches to correctly address the problem is the one that takes into account the 'Smart Land'; a territory in which widespread and shared policies are experimented that are geared to increasing the competitiveness and attractiveness of the territory with specific attention to social cohesion, the dissemination of knowledge, creative growth, accessibility and freedom of movement, the usability of the environment and the quality of the landscape and citizens' lives. From this point of view, it is fundamental to reconstruct a 'middle society' capable of locally appropriating the opportunities contained in the promises of the smart land and translating them into economic, social and cultural practices capable of relating to the logic of flows. In Italy, there are many small towns in which shrewd policies have made it possible to revive the socio-economic fabric as the engine of the economy, producing dozens of replicable national good practices. Despite this, one still perceives a strong air of peripherality, not only linked to geographical issues but also to the lack of socio-economic and political connections between metropolitan - or at least urban - areas and inland areas.

2.4. The Cilento Bio-District

The Cilento Bio-District is part of the province of Salerno, within the area of the 'National Park of Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni', and covers an area of 3,196 square kilometers and includes 41 municipalities, 38 of which contribute to the formation of the natural protected area of one of the largest parks in Europe (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The map shows the spatial distribution of the municipal territories of the Province of Salerno (Italy) participating in the Cilento Bio-district**.**

Table 3. Bio-districts in Italy by 2023, divided by geographical macro-areas (source: our elaboration on data from the Italian Organic Agriculture Association).

Geographic area	Bio-District	Regions
Southern Italy	Eolie	Sicilia
	Valle del Simeto	Sicilia
	Terre degli Elimi	Sicilia
	Borghi Sicani	Sicilia
	Nebrodi	Sicilia
	Grecanico	Calabria
	Baticòs	Calabria
	Sila	Calabria
	Laghi Frentani	Molise
	Delle Lame	Puglia
	Città metropolitana di Bari	Puglia
Central Italy	Via Amerina e Forre	Lazio
	Valle di Comino (Lazio)	Lazio
	Chianti (Toscana)	Toscana
	San Gimignano	Toscana
	Montalbano	Toscana
	Il Piceno	Marche
	Casentino	Toscana
	Valdichiana Aretina	Toscana

	Fiesole	Toscana
	Distretto biologico di Norcia	Umbria
	DIBIUM – Distretto Biologico Umbro	Umbria
	Sud Sardegna e arcipelago del Sulcis	Sardegna
	Dei Parchi	Sardegna
Northern Italy	Val di Gresta	Trentino Alto Adige
	Valle dei Laghi	Trentino Alto Adige
	Valle del Vanoi	Trentino Alto Adige
	Trento	Trentino Alto Adige
	Bio Venezia	Veneto
	Colli Euganei	Veneto
	Bio Altopiano Asiago	Veneto
	Dolomiti bellunesi	Veneto
	Val di Vara	Liguria
	Valle Camonica	Lombardia
	Bergamo Agricoltura sociale	Lombardia
	Valli Valdesi	Piemonte
	Filo di luce in Canavese	Piemonte

The reference area of the Cilento Bio-District is that of the park and surrounding areas, and covers 95 municipalities. It was established following a specific memorandum of understanding between the Campania Region, the Province of Salerno, UNCEM, the Cilento National Park and the Italian Association for Organic Agriculture (Resolution No. 1491 of 25 September 2009). At the national level, then, the 'stability law' (No. 205/2017), defining 'food districts', among which organic districts are also counted, proposed overcoming the old dichotomy 'quality agrifood district rural district' by proposing a new classification that considers their nature as bodies for the integrated development of the territory. This new legislation, by establishing the national register of food districts and identifying specific financial resources from the availability of the Ministry together, has further encouraged the birth of organic districts throughout the country. In addition, many state-owned areas in the municipalities adhering to the Bio-District have been converted to organic farming, and many initiatives have been carried out aimed at bringing to organic farming all those farmers discouraged by the excessive bureaucracy and formality inherent in the third-party organic certification system (carried out by accredited certification bodies at the ministerial level, which carry out control/certification on individual farms and not on groups of farmers or entire territories). The objective is to push these realities in the coming years to become fully certified organic by current regulations. The Bio-District was formally recognised in 2009 with Deliberation no. 1491 of the Campania Region [29]. The Bio-District includes 1,032 organic farms operating a Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA) of 13,749 hectares, strongly oriented towards multi-functional activities (social farms, eco-agro-tourism activities, etc.). In addition to the 1,032 certified biological holdings, there are at least 2,500 holdings in the Bio-District (IN.N.E.R. estimate) that, although adopting organic production methods, are not included in the EU control system. The Arable Land (ARA) of the Bio-District is subdivided as follows: 32% tree crops, 22% arable land/ crops, and 46% meadows and pastures. The main arboreal cultivations are represented by olive trees (widespread in all municipalities), vines (mainly located in the municipalities of Castel San Lorenzo, Agropoli, Castellabate, Rutino, Prignano C. and Moio della Civitella), fruit trees in general (widespread above all in the Alento plain) and figs, widespread in the hilly areas. The farms with breeding have a very small size for cattle (an average of 14 heads per farm), with sheep (25 heads), goats (9 heads), and pigs (3 heads). The only exception is buffalo herds,

which average more than 85 heads per farm. Many areas are also rich in valuable agricultural production, characterised by high typicality and appreciation by the market.

The typicality of these products stems from the link between the vocations of the territory and production technology and is often enhanced by the localisation in the production areas of the processing phases of the agricultural product. As a result, the food products of these areas become cultural heritage and an element of local identity, another peculiar element of the Cilento Bio-District. In this context, local communities play a decisive role and are in towns that guard an extraordinary heritage of cultural and environmental, tangible and intangible assets, traditions and manufacturing skills, of knowledge, often hidden. These are the territories' hidden resources to be put to good use, the so-called local knowledge, both in its institutional and organisational declines as well as in the local production specificities, which have their origins in this knowledge. Local craft skills, which for years have been considered in government policies as one of the factors slowing down the development of territories, can find ample space in the promotion and enhancement of the Bio-District. All this has significant economic, settlement and infrastructural value because it constitutes a widespread and articulated support resource for the enjoyment of natural values and the recovery of historical or innovative economic activities. They are a fixed capital at the disposal of the community that is largely unused or underused and that must be recovered and enhanced. These are factors that characterise local identity and its preservation and become one of the aspects that increasingly emerge as a factor of economic progress.

2.5. Demographic data of the Cilento Bio-District

Within the National Park of Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni, the municipalities that simultaneously fall within the Bio-District Cilento There is one municipality that does not reach 500 inhabitants (Campora), 11 are between 529 (Cuccaro Vetere) and 996 (Orria), 11 are enclosed between 1064 (Prignano Cilento) and 1854 (Caselle in Pittari), another 9 municipalities are distributed in the interval between 2120 inhabitants (Auletta) and 2825 (Castelnuovo Cilento), Sicignano degli Alburni has a population of 3077. Sassano and Centola have just under 5,000 inhabitants, while Casal Velino and Ascea have slightly more than 5,000 inhabitants; Camerota, Vallo della Lucania and Castellabate have between 6849 and 8,667 inhabitants and only Agropoli, which can be considered a small town, reaches 21,272 inhabitants (Table 4). As many as 35 municipalities, out of 41 municipalities in total, have a population below 5,000 inhabitants, and only one exceeds 20,000 inhabitants. Compared to the year 2011, the percentage variation shows that most of the municipalities of the Bio-District recorded a decrease in population, ranging from -2.42% in the municipality of Centola to -37.20% in the municipality of Campora. Excluding San Mauro Cilento, Pisciotta and Centola, located along the Tyrrhenian coastal strip, the remainder of the municipalities are in inland areas. By contrast, only eight municipalities have not suffered a population loss but rather show a positive balance, and most of them, except for Prignano Cilento and Castelnuovo Cilento, are located along the coast (Table 4, Figure 7 and Figure 8). The final consideration, after reading the data, is that the areas located on the coast suffer fewer setbacks from crisis phases, as happened, for example, during and after the COVID-19 crisis. Figure 7 graphically represents the demographic trend of all the municipalities in the Cilento Bio-District.

Table 4. Cilento Bio-District population from 2011 to 2022. Legenda: U=ultra-peripheral; P=peripheral; I=Intermediate. Inner Areas SNAI under experimentation (Figure 6): CI=Cilento Internal, VD =Vallo di Diano (our elaboration on data Istat [30] and SNAI [31]).

Municipalities of the Cilento Bio-District	Population 2022	Population 2011	Variation %	Above see level	Geographical Position	Location concerning the Park	Classes SNAI 2020	SNAI InnerAreas 2021/2027
Campora	336	461	-37,20	520	Inner	IN	U	CI
Rofrano	1278	1655	-29,50	450	Inner	IN	P	
Roscigno	649	827	-27,43	570	Inner	IN	U	CI
Stio	780	942	-20,77	675	Inner	IN	P	CI
Gioi	1122	1339	-19,34	684	Inner	IN	U	CI
Laurino	709	843	-18,90	475	Inner	IN	U	CI
Castel San Lorenzo	2238	2632	-17,61	358	Inner	IN	P	CI
Orria	996	1161	-16,57	540	Inner	IN	U	CI
Rutino	763	889	-16,51	371	Inner	OUT	U	
Monte San Giacomo	1407	1630	-15,85	668	Inner	IN	P	
Morigerati	605	699	-15,54	281	Inner	IN	P	
San Mauro Cilento	856	985	-15,07	560	Coastal	IN	U	
Sessa Cilento	1195	1366	-14,31	520	Inner	IN	U	
Sanza	2369	2697	-13,85	558	Inner	IN	P	VD
Auletta	2120	2406	-13,49	280	Inner	IN	P	
Pisciotta	2423	2748	-13,41	171	Coastal	IN	P	
Stella Cilento	687	774	-12,66	386	Inner	IN	P	
Controne	779	872	-11,94	200	Inner	IN	I	CI
Salento	1793	2005	-11,82	420	Inner	IN	P	CI
Pollica	2141	2393	-11,77	370	Inner	IN	P	
Ceraso	2248	2508	-11,57	325	Inner	IN	U	CI
Sicignano degli Alburni	3077	3419	-11,11	609	Inner	IN	P	
Cannalonga	973	1081	-11,10	570	Inner	IN	U	CI
Cuccaro Vetere	529	580	-9,64	629	Inner	IN	P	
Roccagloriosa	1567	1716	-9,51	430	Inner	IN	P	
Vallo della Lucania	7973	8680	-8,87	380	Inner	IN	P/I	CI
Sassano	4635	4995	-7,77	491	Inner	IN	P	VD
Caggiano	2604	2803	-7,64	828	Inner	OUT	P	
Torraca	1181	1267	-7,28	425	Inner	OUT	U	
Caselle in Pittari	1854	1972	-6,36	444	Inner	IN	U	
San Pietro al Tanagro	1664	1737	-4,39	450	Inner	IN	P	VD
Moio della Civitella	1803	1856	-2,94	515	Inner	IN	U	CI
Centola	4953	5073	-2,42	336	Coastal	IN	P	
Novi Velia	2300	2298	0,09	648	Inner	IN	U	
Camerota	6849	6751	1,43	322	Coastal	IN	P	
Agropoli	21272	20610	3,11	24	Coastal	IN	I	
Ascea	5801	5580	3,81	293	Coastal	IN	P	
Castellabate	8667	8209	5,28	278	Coastal	IN	P	

Prignano Cilento	1064	997	6,30	415	Inner	OUT	U	
Casal Velino	5344	4938	7,60	170	Coastal	IN	P	
Castelnuovo Cilento	2825	2598	8,04	280	Inner	IN	P	CI

(Source: 15th Census of Population and Housing 2011, Resident Population and Population Trends, 2022; National Strategy Inner Areas (SNAI) https://politichecoesione.governo.it/media/rpipea3z/elenco_aree_snai_14-20-e-21-27_20231012.pdf)

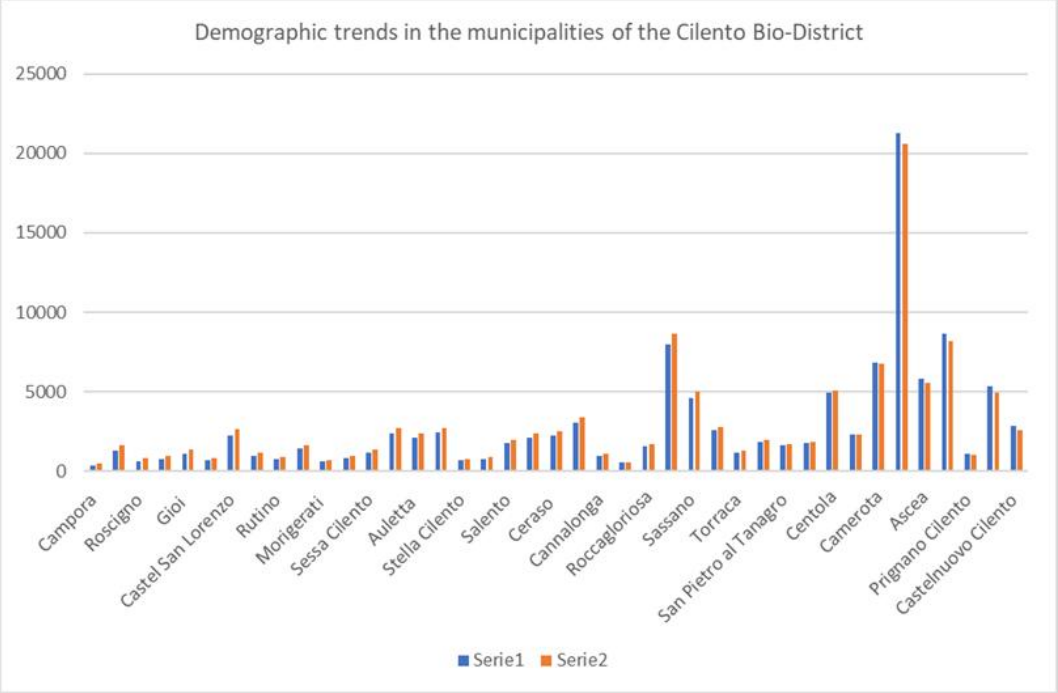

Figure 7. Demographic Trends from 2011 to 2022 in the Bio-Distretto Cilento Municipalities. Legenda: series 1=pop. 2022, series 2= 2011.

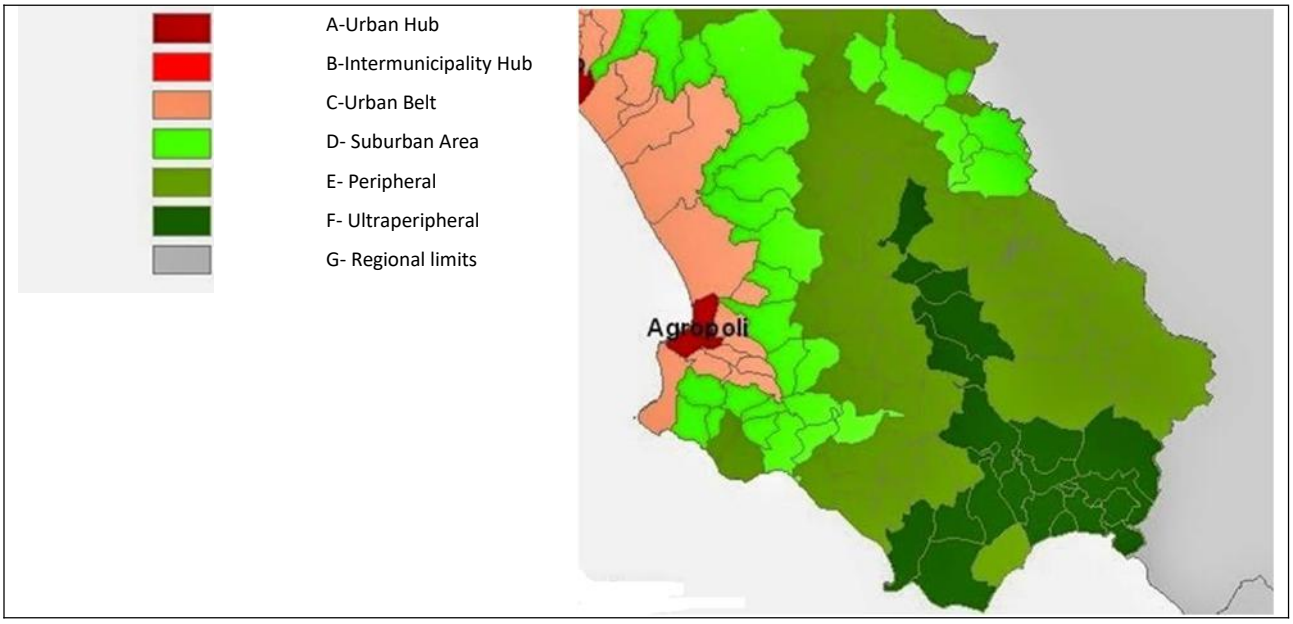

Figure 8. Extract from the map of the '2013 National Strategy of Inner Areas' with the classification of Municipalities. According to the classification, most of the Municipalities in the Cilento Bio-District are 'Peripheral' and 'Ultraperipheral' (Source: elaboration Uval, Uver, Istat, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education).

The South Italy has long known the phenomenon of depopulation by the younger generations, whose emigration is not compensated by immigration. This is also because, in the case of foreigners, opportunities are needed: while internal migration is linked to many factors, first and foremost the family, the population coming from abroad, while being able to choose any territory, seeks work and certain conditions, which are not easily found in inland areas, first and foremost the liveliness of the centre the phenomenon of ageing, although it concerns the whole of Italy, is more accentuated in inland areas, where it requires assistance and suitable services, health and social welfare but also the fight against loneliness, issues common to many areas of Europe [33,34].

3. Results

From the analysis of the literature and the processing of the data collected, it emerged that economic, cultural, environmental and identity traditions potentially enable moments of crisis, such as those experienced during the COVID-19/19 years 2020, 2021 and 2022, to be addressed as a homogeneous geographical area capable of producing the goods necessary for the local population. In Italy, following the launch of the "2014 National Strategy for Inner Regions" (Snai) [31] and after the COVID-19 pandemic, it was necessary to review the objectives on which to focus energy and resources in the Cilento area as part of the "National Recovery and Resilience Plan" (PNRR) [34]. The process of reviewing and updating the objectives required the initiation of a dialogue between local authorities and the various stakeholders. In this way, a new development plan was drawn up for the Inner Region of Cilento, which, in addition to bringing together the mayors of the 29 municipalities in the area [35], has made it possible to identify priorities on which to focus activities and funding to support socio-economic development and try to stem depopulation [36].

The recent paradigm of the new development plan for the Inner Region of Cilento introduces the concept of landscape as a reflection of the millennial use of territorial capital, which has guided the 'Strategy for the Inner Region of Cilento' for the 2014/2020 cycle. continues to be crucial for the development of the territory, but with an evolutionary approach, capable of responding not only to the numbers of depopulation, but also to more complex issues such as innovation and social growth. Seen from a systemic perspective, the landscape becomes a "dynamic" resource in which everything is interconnected. Although still relevant today, the Snai approach is not the only solution to the phenomenon of depopulation, as a broader view of the demographic problem is needed, requiring concrete support, starting with an advantageous fiscal policy to attract young people and investment [37]. In this context, the Inner Region of Cilento has become a testing ground for the capacity for interaction between the 29 municipalities in the area, which are called upon to identify priorities and possible solutions based on the potential of each locality. In the 'laboratory', the main stakeholders in the Bio-District are not only farmers, but also those working in tourism, business and education. They work together to improve the quality of life in rural areas, protecting the land and biodiversity and encouraging small local businesses [38] (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5. National Park Cilento, Vallo di Diano e Alburni: awards and important participation

Given these premises, it is understandable why
the Cilento Bio-District was awarded the title of Best Bio-District in Europe in 2022 by the European Commission. Among the numerous awards received by Cilento;
we would like to mention the following: Mixed Natural and Cultural World Heritage Site; Mab-Unesco Biosphere Reserve;
Geopark of the European and Global Geoparks Network;
Emblematic Community of the "Mediterranean Diet", intangible heritage recognised by UNESCO;
Best Bio-District in Europe, recognition by the European Commission (2022);
Since the year 2014, the Cilento Bio-District has been a founding member and active member of the International Network

of Bio-districts (IN.N.E.R.);
In 2020, it partecipate in the establishment of the Global Alliance for Organic Districts (GOAD) and the World Alliance of Bio-Districts.

Table 6. Swot Analysis of Cilento Bio-District

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
National-level protected nature area	Poor land links
The wealth of natural beauty	Poor maritime links
Recognition of the area as a UNESCO World Heritage Site	Low willingness to join
The presence of archaeological sites in the city of Paestum and Elea Velia	Poor management skills
Charterhouse of San Lorenzo in Padula	Lack of inventiveness in proposing new economic developments
Area included in the MAB Biosphere Reserve (1997)	Low propensity to make a system for cultural initiatives
Part of the UNESCO “Geopark”	Low propensity to make a system for economic initiatives
The area includes the centre (Pioppi) where it was collected by Prof. Ancel Keys in fifty years, the documentation that supported the recognition of the "Mediterranean Diet"	Lack of knowledge and information about the potential of their territory to produce material wealth
Coastal area of interest to the “Santa Maria di Castellabate” Marine Protected Area	Weak internet connections
Coastal area of interest to the Area Marina Protetta “Costa degli Infreschi e della Masseta”	Lack of knowledge of their territory
Recognised as the best Bio-District in Europe	Lack of skills to turn strengths into economic and cultural driving forces
Special Conservation Areas and Special Protection Areas	
OPPORTUNITY	**THREATS**
Central location in the Park National	Adverse climatic conditions
Part of the territory is included in the list of UNESCO's World Heritage	Hydrogeological instability
Presence in the emblematic community of the “Mediterranean Diet”	Adverse natural events, especially earthquakes
To be part of the International Network of Bio-districts - IN.N.E.R.	Poor promotion of the territory
Be included in the “Global Alliance for Organic Districts (Goad)”	Low propensity to vocational training by local communities
Be in the MAB Biosphere Reserve (1997)	Low propensity to be professionally qualified
Join the European Bio-District Network	

An analysis of Table 6 shows how important and already recognised the potential of the study area, which is the subject of this document, is both nationally and internationally. Its strengths lie in the unique characteristics of the territory, landscape and environment, as well as in its strongly anthropogenic aspects. Despite their rich natural, architectural, historical, landscape and cultural heritage, the municipalities of the Cilento Park and those of the Cilento Bio-district are struggling to take off. In this area, attempts to create development are being made, and the capacity and willingness to cooperate are there, unlike in many areas of southern Italy. Considerable proof of this is provided by both the membership of the National Park, which involves as many as eighty municipalities, and the Bio-District, which involves 91 territories and local communities. However, the reality is contradictory and, in

general, it can be said that the centers most easily accessible to those living in the area's centers of attraction, such as the city of Salerno and the continuous, multi-center urban system of Vallo della Lucania, consisting of the centres of Sala Consilina, Padula and Teggiano, are more resistant to abandonment and depopulation, while all the others are suffering a slow but inexorable process of demographic decline. In the inner areas, the towns enjoy a close environmental, morphological and landscape relationship with the surrounding territory and therefore with the matrix of their formation. The towns in these areas have significant economic, settlement and infrastructural value because they constitute a widespread and articulated resource supporting the enjoyment of natural values and the recovery of historical or innovative economic activities. They are a fixed asset available to the community, which, in southern Italy, is largely unused or underused. The so-called minor historic centers, "little-known" inhabited settlements with areas of historical and architectural (and sometimes urban) interest, and small villages (about twenty thousand in total in Italy), they are an integral part of our cultural heritage and preserve an extraordinary wealth of cultural and environmental assets, both tangible and intangible, traditions and manufacturing skills, knowledge and conviviality strongly linked to the "Mediterranean Diet". Tourism finds its main competitive advantage in environmental, artistic and cultural factors, and is therefore perfectly consistent with the sector's promotion and development strategies aimed at safeguarding and enhancing these factors. However, the enhancement of these resources and the development of their tourism potential cannot be achieved simply by ensuring their conservation and accessibility. The symbiotic interaction between local communities, the environment and tourists/travellers finds in "sustainable tourism" a lifeline for mitigating the impact that tourist flows, if not properly managed, can have on the overall context in which the tourist experience takes place: the natural environment, the local economy and the socio-cultural dimension of the host community. Among the distinctive features of the area, the significant presence of Sites of Community Interest and Special Protection Areas, which greatly enhance their naturalistic value, should not be overlooked. The Advisory Committee of the UNESCO MAB Programme recognised the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park as a World Biosphere Reserve during its meeting in Paris on 9-10 June 1997, unanimously including it in the prestigious network of Biosphere Reserves. The park comprises 28 Sites of Community Importance (SCI), established under the Habitats Directive, and 8 Special Protection Areas, established under the Birds Directive, all located in the Mediterranean biogeographical region. The Natura 2000 network covers an area of 118,316 hectares, equal to 65% of the entire park, and includes a wide variety of natural environments, from high mountains to hills, rivers and the sea, characterised by almost completely intact ecosystems that are home to flora and fauna of great value. This natural capital is available to all the local communities in these areas, together with the historical, architectural, urban and landscape heritage, which constitute the identifying features on which the stakeholders of the Inner Regions of Cilento are working in a systemic and organic vision with a focus on sustainability.

4. Discussion

The research demand responds to the need to address the real needs of local communities in terms of improving living conditions and reducing depopulation. Halting depopulation means countering this abandonment by creating job opportunities linked to the sustainable use of the area's significant natural heritage, enhancing and interpreting in an innovative way the practices of a material culture which, over its millennial history, has "built" landscapes, cultures and lifestyles that are now recognised as world heritage. This "capital" has a potential that has not yet been fully exploited. The aim is therefore to enhance the value of local areas and communities and transform critical issues into opportunities. The possible solution is closely linked to the implementation of a systemic strategy capable of influencing the usability, enhancement and protection of local resources, traditions and crafts, whose excellence is already recognised and appreciated but not yet sufficiently valued. The "Circuiti Cilentani" project is

part of this approach, having mapped and georeferenced 500 km of trails in the area [39]. Together with the walking trails, the portal also promotes the villages and the hospitality system (in connection with typical products, local traditions and events). The trails have also been uploaded to Wikiloc [40], the global platform for excursionists. All these initiatives have a direct impact on the economic enhancement of the area and the creation of new business opportunities, especially for the younger generation. The Cilento Inner Park also offers an interesting range of museums and cultural heritage sites that tell the story of the area's history and culture. The Park Authority's new program includes measures to improve accessibility, making the experience more interesting and interactive. At the same time, the initiative aims to promote school tourism, preserve and transmit the history and culture of the villages, enhance the local heritage and create experiential learning opportunities for the younger generations. Currently, the resilience of local communities is a crucial issue in contexts where over 20% of the resident population has been lost in just 20 years. Employment prospects are the only thing that can keep the inhabitants of small inland towns from leaving. In our opinion, to achieve results that are useful to local communities, it is first necessary to quantify and monetise the services provided by ecosystems and then incorporate them into land and landscape planning and management processes, involving the population as much as possible [41]. In this context, interesting results have been achieved only in a few limited areas of southern Italy (for example, again in the Cilento area, in the municipality of Felitto, with the enhancement of the Calore river gorges; in the municipality of Morigerati, with the cultural promotion of the Bussento river caves), mainly focused on tourism initiatives, which have often driven craft activities and the processing of food and wine products. In this sense, tourism is not a partial or seasonal solution to the problems of the Cilento Inner Region but represents a generator of opportunities for the area and its inhabitants, both those who live there and those who decide to settle there.

5. Conclusions

The geomorphological characteristics of the Cilento make the area difficult to access, which, on the other hand, has preserved intact traditions and beautiful landscapes that still today maintain a strong link between the cultures of the communities and the landscape. The threat posed by the progressive depopulation and ageing of the communities still exists in this territory to abandonment, with the inevitable consequent degradation. The main problem is to halt and reverse the process of depopulation of the resident population through a targeted strategy based on exploiting the potential expressed by the territory [42]. The study focused on the Cilento area in the face of the encouraging results achieved in other Italian regions, such as Tuscany, Umbria and Emilia-Romagna. Decisive is the intervention of public institutions in support of the bottom-up initiatives expressed by the territory, which must tend to connect the twenty-nine Cilento municipalities and consequently create the best conditions to be able to prepare and present projects that can be financed. Overriding this process is the creation of conditions for the modernisation and development of sustainable economic activities, starting with the role of the Mediterranean Diet.

Supplementary Materials

The following supporting information can be downloaded at: Ministero delle Politiche Agrarie e Forestali (Elaborazioni su dati Organismi di Controllo e Amministrazioni regionali); Figure 1: Degree of urbanisation in Union Europe (2021); Figure 2: Rural population (%) of Europe based on universal EU definition; Figure 3: Regional distribution in hectares of organic land in Italy in 2022; Figure 4: Territorial distribution of organic operators in Italy in 2022; Figure 5: Area of the Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni National Park; Figure 6: Maps showing the municipalities in the province of Salerno; Figure 7: Demographic Trends from 2011 to 2022 in the Bio-

Distretto Cilento Municipalities; Figure 8: Extract from the map of the ‘2013 National Strategy of Inner Areas' with the classification of Municipalities.

Table 1: Global rank of rural population percent, 2023; Table 2: Development of organic farming areas in Europe (2019-2022); Table 3: Bio-districts in Italy by 2023; Table 4: Cilento Bio-District population from 2011 to 2022; Table 5: National Park Cilento, Vallo di Diano e Alburni: awards and important participation; Table 6: Swot Analysis of Cilento Bio-District.

Author Contributions

For research articles with several authors, a short paragraph specifying their contributions must be provided. The following statements should be used “Conceptualization, A.B. and T.V.; methodology, A.B. and T.V.; software, X.X.; validation, A.B. and T.V.; formal analysis, A.B. and T.V..; investigation, A.B. and T.V.; resources, X.X.; data curation, X.X.; writing—original draft preparation, A.B. and T.V.; writing—review and editing, P.P.; visualization, A.B..; supervision, A.B. and T.V.; project administration, X.X.; funding acquisition, A.B. and T.V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.” Please turn to the CRediT taxonomy for the term explanation. Authorship must be limited to those who have contributed substantially to the work reported.

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This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

Data Availability Statement

On data Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT).

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in this work

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