

IDENTITIES OF A PERI-URBAN HABITAT

The potential for agricultural cluster development in Tirana

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As often the case with the newly formed peri-urban areas in the outskirts of expanding cities, the territories that surround Tirana face the pressure of converting agricultural fields into urbanized land, resulting in identity loss, environmental deterioration, and high unemployment accompanied by poverty and ultimately a low quality of life. Besides the challenges, the proximity to the capital city provides also advantages, such as economies of scale and scope deriving from the agglomeration of the activities, good access to labor force, market, infrastructure, as well as educational and research facilities, constituting therefore the basics for cluster development. This paper explores the evolution and present state of one of the first environments, in sequence, encountered by the visitors approaching the capital of Albania, Tirana. Once a carefully planned agricultural landscape, today it is a hybrid urban-rural spatial continuum, a peri-urban habitat searching for a proper identity. We will try to elaborate on the potential of the area to host cluster development, with a specific attention paid to agricultural clusters that would have an important effect not only to its economic performance but also on the preservation of the territory and landscape.

Keywords: Peri-urban identities, agricultural clusters, Tirana

1. Introduction

The Tirana valley gives the impression of a natural amphitheater crossed by the homonym river and shaped by the Dajti mountain (east), the hills systems (south and southwest), and the Ishm (northwest). The main road approaching the capital are Tirana-Durrës axis (with more than 250 businesses and around 15,000-20,000 daily commuters, and a number of Universities adding up to the cluster-formation potential¹) and the North axis crossing the spontaneous urban settlement of international Airport is found at the edge, in the northwest. The area is also trespassed by the old railroad, heading towards Durrës and the North, and practically no more in use. (Fig1) (Toto, Gjika, Karafili, Shutina, & Ymeri, 2015).

2. Methodology

The data presented in this paper was gathered through qualitative methods: desk research on the policies applied thus far and semi-structured interviews with specialists, local farmers and inhabitants.

The desk research focused on literature overview as well as published reports and policy documents on the past and current policies in national and local scale.

The interviewed specialists are experts in agriculture and were asked on the potential of the area to re-activate this activity, the fertility of the soil, the most suitable plants for this kind of soil, etc.

The local farmers and inhabitants were asked on their current economic activities, their needs, the future plans, and their relationship with other farmers and industries in the area, as well as public actors such as governmental agencies and the agricultural university.

The field visit served to map the eventual cluster actors and gather empirical evidence on the current conditions of the area and the activities that take place there.

Porter's clusters map model served as a theoretical framework to introduce the cluster in the area.

¹ This data are estimated through field surveys (social- economic and visual) carried out by POLIS University in the framework of master workshops and research studies.

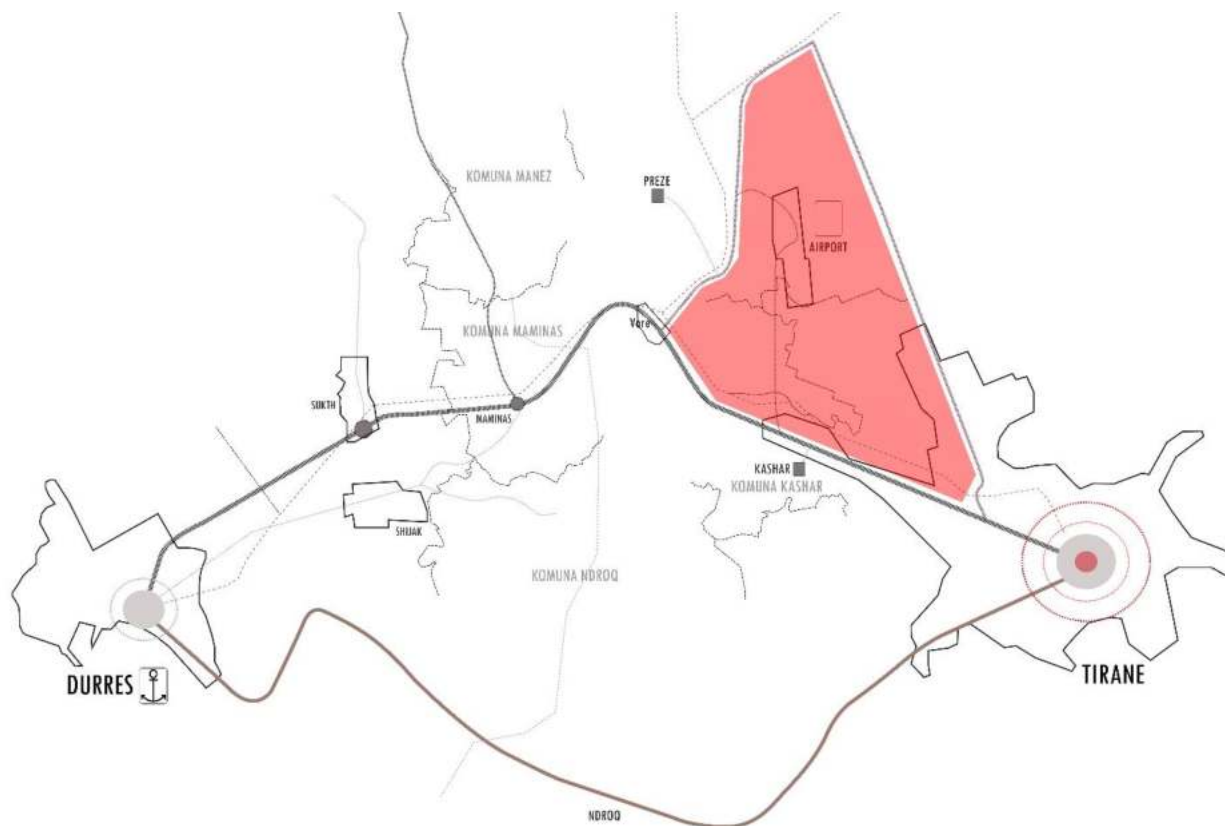


Figure 1: The study area in the regional context
Source: (Metro_POLIS, 2013)

3. The evolution of the area's identity

Two decades ago, rail convoys were a usual presence in the Albanian landscape. Travelers were mostly using this mean of communication, making the railway itineraries and the train stations, the windows and gates from where the acquaintance with environments, cities and places in general started. The entrance to Tirana, as well, was happening mainly along rails, over passing settings differing a lot from those encountered by the asphalted perspective.

The presence and image of subjectively 'gigantic silos, large industrial compounds and that of the hospital surrounded only by space, while approaching Tirana, are still a part of the Albanians collective memory. The same can be said for the character of this space made of wide cultivated fields, populated by the frequent presence of large groups of farmers, less frequent Albanian homemade red painted tractors and vineyard or olive grove covered hillsides. That is more or less what was awaiting and accompanying the visitor approaching or leaving the capital, a relatively readable spatial layout with man-made and natural, settings distinctly placed in the landscape

Although heavily mutated under the thick Albanian transition, a lot of evidences have survived in situ, in hand for a watchful eye to discover. The train isn't there anymore, but there's still more large plantations but the poplar rows in between them still exist; The seasonal noises of the combat jets, now just scrap leftovers, have been replaced by the daily clatter of the passenger planes; Either the former industrial and agricultural ruins, the Tirana river, the place names now melted under the same built

continuum, the indigenous inhabitants along the multitude of new settlers remain today a structural part of this peri-urban triangle.

Soon after the regime swap, buses, light vans and the first private owned automobiles began to overtake the train service. Time became more precious than some few money spared by the inexpensive ticket. Though, despite the relentless decline, rail convoys resisted as a prime choice for some more years at the beginnings of the Albanian transition. So did the longitudinal section through the railway path that remained the habitual experience for most of the travelers. Transiting, at 40km/h, from the window seat you could notice in a relatively short lapse of time the rapid-changing of the surrounding landscape, itself transiting from an agricultural habitat to an expanding slum.

The definitive fade of the Albanian rail transport interrupted the experiencing from within of this suburban part of the capital. This itinerary, that was penetrating this area, starting at the international airport, has been forgotten gradually, together with the perspectives it was offering from within. The above mentioned set of imagery are now recorded history replaced by the superficial perspectives of the two tangential road transport corridors connecting Tirana to the Adriatic and the Northern regions. The triangle of land on the Tirana's river margins kept developing unnoticed by the many under the general catchall area, diverting entirely from the past socialist *climax of ideological anti-urbanism*. (Davis

Action has not been lacking in the last two decades, and even before. This action has changed actors and intensity. At the beginnings it was done by centralized structures, today instead by individual interventions, and the last ones have a more visible impact. Today we see an environment filled by a multitude of spaces, buildings and functions. The Tirana-Durres highway, the first road in the country counting more than two lanes turned in the main place where the change was visible, a transitory space *that loses its architectures as a reptile loses its skin* (Koolhaas & Foster, 2013), a showroom for the Albanian fresh capitalism

Among the new functions hosted by this important infrastructural connection and one of the very first signals that placed Albania within the edges of the global economy, was the transfer of the Coca Cola facilities along the Tirana-Durres corridors. It was 1994 and the factory was located on a strip of land in between the railway and the driveway, with the front marked by a giant coke bottle facade. The passage from the public transportation, represented by the railway, to the private transportation, associated to the driveways, went in parallel with the ongoing mutation of the Albanian society, from a collective-socialist to consumerist-capitalist stage. It is not by chance that one of the symbols of excellence chose the highway, at the time just a narrow strip of asphalt, as the orientation for its headquarters, a farsighted symptom forecasting the times to come.

Eleven years later, another function appears, the first Albanian shopping mall located in the very same area. It was 2005 and the query railway vs highway was meaningless at that point. Any Albanian could experience in first place without having to travel abroad a typical space of the western lifestyle, linked together by the *conditioned air system*. (Koolhaas & Foster, 2013)

The rising profiles of the large structures hosting the principal showrooms of the Albanian capitalism are enclosing any visual vector toward the inner part of this area. Beside the agricultural land, many bunkers are still here to remind us of another former character of the area, recalling an era of strong militarization. There are less than before, for the most part just concrete piles disfigured from their steel skeleton. The former rows are still today, visually easy to connect, assembling the spatial fortification wall once there to protect Tirana from any western hazard. It can remind us of what Tirana is in spatial terms, *A Ring City* (Muntoni, 1997). After the 1858, another ring city, Vienna, built its rings, parks, grandiose public buildings and squares by upgrading their urban fabric in a space of similar valence. In its own way Tirana is building here its capitalist inspirations blurred by informality and poor governance. Represented by the large economic agglomerations, on the borderlines, the inner informal sprawls and the barren agricultural land, deserted railway and polluted river.

As for many aspects of the Albanian society, the character of today's built form has continuity with the area's past. Among the reasons for this fracture were: the massive migrations from the different parts of the country; the further migrations in the western country and its relative cultural influences; the spineless architectonic heritage leftover from the past decades.

Architecture has its patterns and arrangements, in different compositions as a result of (Unwin, 2009), and so it is the Tirana's suburban built environment, filled with eclectic forms. This can be traced to the regional influences of either the Albanian origin places of the settlers or their later western European emigration destinations. The reasons behind the appearances of these buildings apparently go beyond simple functional needs and have more ornamental character turning in proper status symbols controlled by none other than the economic health of the owner.

The present typologies originated from the first provisional and all alike shelters that later became permanent and customized, passing from one floor structures built with inexpensive concrete blocks to gaudy villas displaying more than sheltering needs. The unfinished basic flat ceilings framed only by the protuberant steel filaments of the underlying columns, turned in richly shaped slopping roofs. Buildings elevated on slender pilotis, inhabited only in the upper floors still populate the flat landscape exposing ambitious objectives juxtaposed to the incapability to achieve them.

The first contact with the local people occurs along the Tirana river banks, after crossing a narrow corridor in between newly built houses that apparently had a granted public passage. The large ridge that dominates any map or satellite photo and that would normally remain unnoticed if you are not searching for it, opens up surprisingly. Going so close to private domains that are usually frequented by familiar faces attracted the attention of the inhabitants allowing unplanned short interviews, often in form of spontaneous chats that would later help in having new clues about this habitat from an inner perspective. Two decades of unnoticed development from the outside was there waiting to be rediscovered in the memories and in the everyday experiencing of the area by its inhabitants.

A man in his forties approaches, after noticing us walking close to his house garden along the Tirana River Banks. His home looks at the river and the blurry skyline of Kamza, toward something that must have been quite a picturesque view. Only a thin extruded line, a wooden curtain, separates his carefully planted garden with his fertilized soil and apparently healthy vineyard, from a stretch of the manmade landscape made of construction leftovers, smashed bricks, concrete pieces and plastic waste. You could probably count the years of the Albanian transition by observing the juxtaposition of the layers along the water banks.

Soon the group gets larger and the discussion more animated, revealing more about the way this seemingly continuous and homogenous peri-urban area functions. They frequently refer to oblivious concepts as the center of the town, the agricultural establishment, the former factory, etc. Physically they are still there, but whilst once the centralities of the area, at least during the working hours, today they are hardly distinguishable.

The local inhabitants stress their connection to Tirana albeit the closer proximity to another municipality: Kamza (one of the largest in the country). They proclaim themselves citizens of Tirana but the presence of the capital city is nowhere to be found. This makes you think about the high fragmentation of the area and the lack of continuity not only in physical terms but also in terms of a missing identity and sense of belonging.

The industrial identity building elements of the past seem impotent to provide a future projection for these people, whilst the only continuity element whom they remain close to, is the land. Agriculture has been and although in a totally different setting, remains the primary activity of the area, now more present in the form of private gardens and self-employing small farms.

Based on this analysis, the revival of agriculture might turn into a mean of collective efforts and a community building instrument, providing not only economic benefits but also a way to preserve the territory and the landscape.

4. Theoretical background

Influenced by Porter's work on competitiveness and clusters, but also by the increase in the service and knowledge economy, many countries are developing cluster policies or introducing the concept of cluster promotion in their regional or economic and business development policies. Besides the measures taken in national level, the European Union has played an important role to encourage and foster cluster policies. However, cluster policy remains a new phenomenon, varying noticeably among the different countries within EU, and recently also emerging in other Eastern European countries.

The development of cluster policy is still at an early stage in most countries. There are significant differences among the countries of Eastern and Western Europe. Among those countries that have adopted the policy of the cluster after 2000, are mostly small countries in terms of population and/or geographical size of countries in Eastern Europe. (Obadic, 2013)

Albania is still new to the concept of clusters, and albeit the increasing and explicit use of the term in the objectives of several agencies, an articulated cluster policy is lacking. It is also impossible to find any official figures on cluster activity in Albania, neither in national/regional data, nor in the European level. The European Cluster Observatory (2014) also provides no reports on clusters in Albania. Nevertheless clusters constitute a real potential. In order to face competition, Albanian firms are becoming more and more aware that cost-efficiency is not enough. There is a need for qualitative products, which require the adequate technology, human capital and knowledge. Achieving such factors individually is very hard if not impossible. Positive externalities deriving from economies of scale and scope provide better chances to lay the ground for joining forces in otherwise too costly investments, especially in technology and R&D.

Some of the early clusters that already started to emerge are in the meat processing industry, medicinal and aromatic herbs industry, leather good production industry and tourism industry. Not surprisingly the major part of the actors pertaining to these tentative clusters are located in Tirana. Tirana constitutes the pulsing heart of the Albanian economy, as well as the concentration of the labor force and with a population of nearly 1/3 of the national one, it also represents the largest market in the country.

However, Tirana – Durres region constitute an entity that comprises more than just the two cities and the highway that connects them, which is also the business corridor that hosts many industries operating in the country. Both cities, especially Tirana are surrounded by a peri-urban fringe that has been under constant development pressure, resulting in the rapid conversion of agricultural fields into urban land.

The area lying between Tirana and the Rinas airport, has been transformed from a vast land dedicated entirely to agriculture, especially fertile for crops and orchards, into an urbanizing territory facing the typical challenges of the peri-urban areas: identity loss, environmental deterioration, high unemployment accompanied by poverty and ultimately low quality of life.

Nevertheless, after 2 decades of massive immigration fluxes settled in the region the surface and tripled its population, there is a certain saturation that has decreased significantly the pace of this growth. Moreover, the construction sector is no longer thriving under high housing demand, but with a considerable vacant housing stock, the development pressure in these peri-urban areas is no longer as strong as it used to be.

The actual condition is a highly fragmented area, with developed plots spread throughout the territory, but also a considerable amount of vacant land that still possesses a strong potential to be exploited for

agricultural purposes. Such potential is currently underestimated and the promotion of an agricultural cluster would provide a vital instrument for the local economic development and reduction of poverty.

The current agricultural situation of the area is shown at Figure 2.



Figure 2: Synthesis of the Agricultural System in the Area
Source: (Toto, Gjika, Karafili, Shutina, & Ymeri, 2015)

The current businesses present in the perimeter of the area employ primarily people from outside the area, failing to have an impact in the economic reality of the inhabitants. (Metro_POLIS, 2013)

In the past the main employers of these people were industry (the coal mine of Valias and the brick factory) and agriculture. In the current conditions none of the above is active, but whilst the reactivation of the industry requires major investments that must be initiated by the government being a public property, agriculture constitutes the highest potential of the area for its future development.

In many developing countries, the greatest potential for sustainable growth lies in agriculture. Yet ironically, it is this sector where poverty is most widespread and found in its worst forms. Small-scale farmers, and the rural communities in which they live, are imprisoned within a cycle of low margins, resulting in low risk-taking ability and low investment, which leads to low productivity, low market orientation and low value addition which, in turn, nets low margins (Gélvez-Nogal, 2013).

Indeed the eventual impact of agricultural clusters in developing countries has been little discussed in the current body of literature, but is recently receiving increasing attention.

Eastern Europe is, in comparison with Western Europe, less developed, there is a high cost (agricultural) labor, there is a high geographical proximity of clients and the amount of land and natural resources are also present as their comparative advantages. (Looijen&Heijman, 2013)

5. The Agricultural Cluster Concept

Building on Porter's (1998) definition of clusters as geographically proximate groups of companies and associated institutions in a particular field, linked by commonalities and complementarities, Gálvez-Nogales (2010) defines the agricultural clusters as simply a concentration of production institutions that are engaged in the food and agricultural sector and that inter-connect and build value networks, either formally or informally, when addressing common challenges and pursuing common opportunities.

In the selected area many of the prerequisites for initiating a cluster are met.

There is vacant land especially qualitative for crops and orchards. Specialists say that land suitability analysis indicate that the area is appropriate to cultivate vegetables, fruits, vineyards as well as flowers. In 1990 the peri-urban areas covered 16% of the agricultural land and were responsible for 28% of the overall domestic agricultural products. (Lushaj, 2014)

There is a tradition in agriculture, but more importantly considering the previous agricultural use of the area, the eventual new farmers can make use of the existing irrigation channels and through joint action mobilize the investments to upgrade the former farming facilities, invest in new technologies and in research aiming at an increased productivity.

The contact with the research is facilitated by the presence of governmental bodies, universities and research institutes such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water Management; The Rural Agricultural Development Agency, The National Food Authority; The Center for Agricultural Technology Transfer; the Agricultural University of Tirana, but also private institutions with expertise in territorial and environmental issues such as POLIS University, Co-PLAN institute.

Indeed the lacking communication among the business and academia is a missed opportunity for both parties as well as for the country in general. Industry-university collaboration in Albania is the lowest in the world. In 2012, Albania ranked 139 out of 144 countries. This constrains opportunities for growth and represents an untapped knowledge potential for innovation. (World Bank, 2013)

There is a new logistic park and multimodal station being built in the area that together with the Tirana-Durrës corridor ensure good accessibility and lower the transportation costs.

Many of the businesses in the food processing industry are located in close proximity and so are the labor force and the market.

There is an increasing interest in agriculture and greenhouses highlighted by the willingness to invest by the government and the private investors alike. A number of NGO-s supported by international donors (i.e. GIZ; Partners Albania and Rockefeller Brothers) has been quite active lately to promote agricultural and green start-ups.

Moreover the agricultural cluster may positively influence the performance of other industries such as the food industry, wine industry, but also agri-tourism. In the center of this area, there is a family business Uka Farm that is currently functioning as a farm but also as a winery as well as a restaurant. The farm follows the farm to fork concept. Such complementary activities and others as food festivals and tasting tours can mitigate joint action among the players of the eventual cluster.

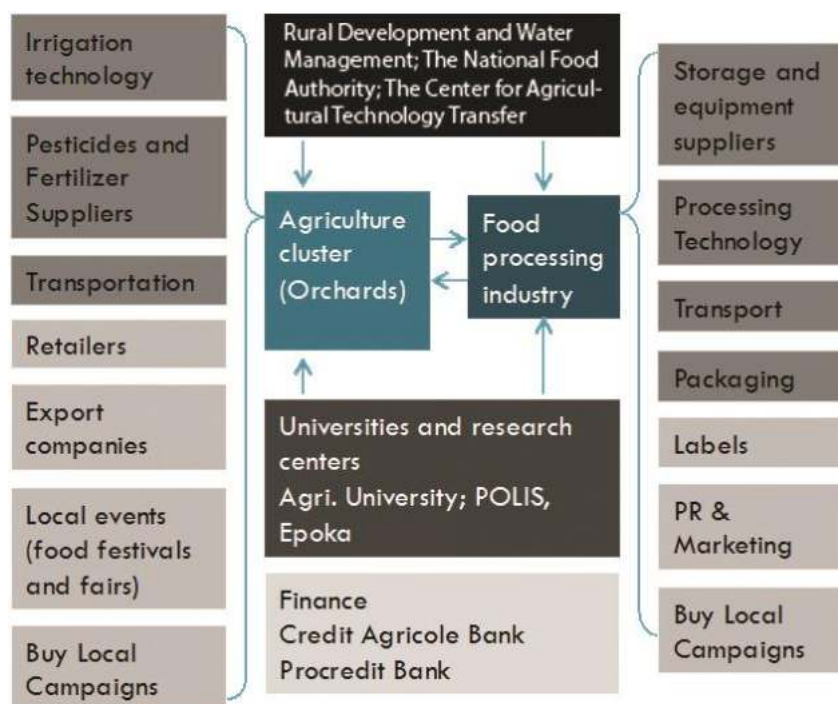


Figure 3: The agricultural cluster model

However, albeit the potential, there are several constraints that prevent the development of an agricultural cluster in the area.

Albania can be categorized in countries that lack a conducive enabling environment for agricultural lending. Although climate and soils are excellent for farming, in combination with the fragmentation of farm land into plots of little more than 1 ha, it is clear that Albania is not well prepared to compete on international markets. That said, it is exporting particularly vegetables and fruits to some of its neighboring countries and herbs/aromatic plants to the EU and the US. Low labor costs and aforementioned excellent natural conditions are key drivers behind these exports. (Rabo Development)

The territory is highly fragmented and sometimes for specific plots there is no clear ownership of the land or overlapping property rights. Even though the development pressure on the area has decreased, the alternative use as urban land is still retained more profitable by the land owners, who prefer to keep it vacant or sell with the market value as urban land.

The peri-urban model has allowed agricultural land use to remain sufficiently profitable vis-à-vis urban land use and is due to the existence of a mono-cultural society which has prevailed despite immigration. A second important aspect is the predominance of small properties rather than the large areas of cultivation characteristic of the conventional rural sector. This is associated with the potential use of the land for urbanization and with the preoccupation of individual producer activity over the communal activities of the past (H. Losada, 1998)

Additionally there is a high mistrust among the actors that might eventually engage in the potential agricultural cluster. As recent studies show, the level of mistrust is even higher in the Albanian context.

The barriers faced by small- and medium-sized firms in transition economies are different from the barriers identified in other developing and developed countries. Cultural issues, especially, national culture plays

an important role in knowledge sharing in firms. Transition economies have unique social and cultural conditions, partly influenced by decades of harsh and repressive communism. Some of the transition economies with the harshest and repressive regimes face issues such as lack of trust that have significantly influenced the cultural fabric of the society in these transition economies. (Vajjhalala

Moreover they face the typical communication bottleneck present in almost every cluster initiative.

In real clusters, communication between different kinds of agents is massively flawed. Suppliers who believe they have something new exciting to offer, have a hard time even to be allowed to meet with the right people at a large enterprise. Large enterprises searching for a new supplier are more likely to look for an established international supplier than to go searching among innovative SMEs located right under their nose. Policy makers have only vague ideas about what business really needs. Researchers are more interested in academic publishing than commercializing their new findings or talking to business people. Schools formulate their curricula oblivious to what skills the industry is calling for. Entrepreneurs find it difficult to persuade banks to invest in new innovative businesses. It is not difficult to understand that these connections will not just happen spontaneously. (Ketels, Lindqvist, & Slevell, 2010)

Indeed considering the stage of the Albanian economy and the general and specific challenges faced by an eventual agricultural cluster initiative, it is important that the public authorities (in national or regional level) adopt and implement cluster policies able to understand and address the particular needs of the industry.

Sometimes the development of such policies is challenging itself as the cluster concept is still emerging and therefore does not offer a practical guide for policy-makers in their efforts to design and implement policies. A key limitation is a lack of clear cluster boundaries. The majority of the countries have not developed a strategic approach on cluster-form organizations. (Obadic, 2013)

According to IRE Subgroup, the following is needed: (IRE, 2003)

- plan to carry out mapping studies on clusters, identify regions, sectors of activity, technologies that would benefit from cluster-form organizations and integrate them in their overall strategy on economic and social growth;
- identify barriers and limiting factors to cluster development and organize regular revision of their existing policy measures;
- obtain their governments long-term commitment; and
- raise awareness on the potential benefits of clusters among the players concerned

Some examples of government support to agro-based clusters are provided by Gálvez-Nogales (2010):

- Information collection and diffusion
- Promotion of associations and networks and development of PPPs
- Support to export activities and collective marketing initiatives
- Provision of training and technical assistance to cluster stakeholders
- Improvement of access to finance
- Policy support and regulatory function
- Creation of an enabling environment, including public investment in infrastructure
- Research and development

However besides the top-down approach, there are other forms of cluster organizations that might apply to the Albanian conditions.

Cluster initiatives typically are organized through small and nimble organizations with an entrepreneurial spirit driving the organization, walking across the gaps between actors inside clusters, and

receiving financial support from a range of both public and private sources. Half of the organizations have 3 or fewer employees (Ketels, Lindqvist, & Slevell, 2012)

If applied in cluster scale the policies that intend to promote local production can be much more effective than the current flat policies such as exemption from the petroleum tax of all farmers regardless of their sector or productivity. This is basically subsidizing the inefficiency, while on the other hand cluster support together with campaigns that rise awareness on the consumption of Made in Albania products would increase the chances of local products to sustain competitiveness.

The new territorial and administrative division of the country foresees that the peri-urban areas surrounding Tirana will be part and under the jurisdiction of the Municipality of Tirana, therefore local policies can play a role, besides the national one.

Such policies must aim the land consolidation and put a greater focus on the organic products, as well as products with potential for exports. Encouraging the local production to obtain quality certificates will improve their competitiveness and trigger their exportation.

6. Conclusions

Albania is still new to the concept of clusters, but there is a potential for cluster development in the current Albanian economy and some early initiatives are emerging, especially in the Tirana-Durres region.

Both cities, especially Tirana are surrounded by a peri-urban fringe that has been under constant development pressure, resulting in the rapid conversion of agricultural fields into urban land, resulting in an identity loss, environmental deterioration, and high unemployment accompanied by poverty and ultimately low quality of life.

This paper explored the idea of an agricultural cluster that would be instrumental for the local economic development and reduction of poverty. Besides the crop and orchard production, the agricultural cluster may positively influence the performance of other industries such as the food industry, wine industry, but also agro-tourism. The development of an agricultural cluster would also help preserve the territory, environment and landscape of the area from ulterior deterioration.

There are however constraints that prevent these initiatives, among which the most important the high mistrust among the actors and lack of communication among the stakeholders.

One of the findings is that the local inhabitants remain close to the land and see agricultural a natural activity and a way of living. Clusters can turn these activities from family-scaled to market players.

Such bottlenecks can be overcome through tailor made strategies that engage both the public and the private sector. Small and operational cluster organizations can be effective in facilitating the communication and mitigate joint action among the players in a cluster.

The role of the government however is much needed in providing basic infrastructure, easing the access to finance and executing its regulatory function.

The policies aiming to promote the economic development of these areas and the consumption of local products can be much more effective if designed and applied in cluster level.

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