

# The case of Castel del Giudice, Italy

**The Mayor of Castel de Giudice initiated a food policy process as part of a strategy to halt depopulation and promote economic development in this small community. Now the municipality is seeking to enlarge the scope of its food policy council by cooperating with its neighbours to adopt a city region food systems approach.**

Castel del Giudice is one of the smallest municipalities in Molise Region (Italy) and is a typical example of the social and economic marginality of the area. Since he was elected in 2014, the mayor has undertaken a number of initiatives to halt the dramatic rate of depopulation that is affecting not only the village, but also other towns and villages of the region. The territory of the Municipality, has been classified as an 'internal area' according to the definition set by the Italian Strategy on Inner Areas<sup>1</sup>. This national strategy aims to improve the quality of life and economic wellbeing of people living in areas characterised by small towns and villages with restricted access to essential services.

## Food and the territory

Food is one of main assets of the territory, typical products being olive oil, apples, cheeses and traditional meals. However, neither these products, nor the agricultural landscape that accompanies them and the ecosystem services linked to it have ever been valorised. Because of the lack of institutional initiative by the disadvantaged territories and their lack of confidence in economic recovery, these resources had never been integrated into a logic of local development and territorial attractiveness, either by the local population or representatives of the "slow" and sustainable tourism movement interested in pure and pristine areas, such as Castel del Giudice. Furthermore, typical problems related to food in large cities (e.g., access to quality food, urbanisation of agricultural areas, length and complexity of supply chains) did not concern the municipality of Castel del Giudice, or indeed other municipalities located in 'internal' and mountainous areas.

Sensing the potential of local development linked to the promotion of a sustainable food system, the Municipality decided to develop a food policy (*Piano del Cibo*) at the municipal level. Supported by researchers from the University of Molise it started in September 2018, and has already produced some outputs in terms of governance and

dissemination of the food policy principles among the population and stakeholders.

## The process

The steps for the adoption of the food plan by the Municipality of Castel del Giudice and its implementation were agreed together with the working group of the University of Molise and were programmed as follows:

- three meetings with local stakeholders, identified by the Municipality, in order to get to know about the territory, its needs and potential, and gather information on the local agro-food system;
- presentation and sharing with the stakeholders of the draft of the food policy of Castel del Giudice;
- resolution adopting the food policy by the Municipal Council of Castel del Giudice;
- the establishment of a food policy council as a governance structure for the implementation and monitoring of the food policy;
- prioritisation of the specific objectives (macro and micro);
- formulation of a project form for each of the actions, listing indications for the operational development of the actions: resources and pre-conditions, implementation timing, financial requirements and possible sources of funding, priorities with respect to the whole set of actions, expected impacts, output indicators, synergies and feedback between the various actions;
- identification of economic, social and technical partners;
- implementation of the priority objectives.



Draft document of the local food policy. Photo by Ancy Kollamparambil

1) The classification of Inner Area is set by parameters based on access to healthcare, education and transportation services. More information on the link: [www.oecd.org/cfe/regional-policy/1.2%20Promoting%20Growth.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/cfe/regional-policy/1.2%20Promoting%20Growth.pdf)



Castel del Giudice, Molise. Photo by Ancy Kollamparambil

The food policy for Castel del Giudice was set together with stakeholders, and the mayor was present during all the sessions. Several drafts of the document were circulated among the group, and at the beginning of March 2019, the final version was approved by the Municipal Council. Briefly, the food policy contains four main lines of action, for a total of 17 projects: from social agriculture to short food supply chains, from the valorisation of typical products to sustainable and slow tourism, from food district to environmental measures.

### Lessons

The food policy council is the result of an initiative by a particularly innovative mayor. In the village there were no bottom-up associative movements that pushed for a more sustainable food system. Yet, supported by a preliminary analysis, the administration has decided to invest on food as a lever of local development and way of improving the attractiveness of the territory.

The experience of Castel del Giudice is an example of how university action at the local level can be fundamental to animating the territory and making innovations that a small municipality may not have the resources to do independently. The meetings of the food council in the small municipality highlighted for instance, the need to adapt and “translate” the academic language related to the fast growing and specialist literature on food policies into concepts and actions understandable to the local population. This aspect is important to ensure that the food policy council does not appear as a top-down initiative, but rather an attempt to listen to citizens on a subject that concerns them in everyday life and which, potentially, can revitalise the territory economically and socially.

One of the objectives is now to extend the scope of the food policy and the food policy council to cover a wider territory than the municipality. The flows of material and immaterial resources related to food have a wide-scale effect, and for this reason it is important that the food policy encompasses

rural, per-urban and urban territories in an integrated way. The mayor of Castel del Giudice, together with the university, is working towards involving other neighbouring municipalities through direct discussions and proposals for applying EU Rural Development projects at a wide scale. This is necessary to create synergies in terms of the effectiveness of some actions, such as the organic districts, the food and wine routes, the recovery of abandoned land, and the promotion of short food supply chains.

At the same time, it still seems to be a complex challenge to communicate the medium to long-term benefits of a territorial food policy to local administrators, who are often involved in emergencies and are held back by their scepticism, whether cultural or ideological. Until 1963, the Province of Isernia (to which Castel del Giudice belongs) was part of the same administrative region that includes the neighbouring provinces to the north of the village. Speaking with local stakeholders, we had the feeling that the connections between the provinces provide a possible and realistic opportunity, despite the fact that they are now administratively separated in two different regions. Nevertheless, parochial sentiments and sense of pride still prevent this union from happening. Yet, our experience revealed that, if properly and adequately explained, the benefits of a food policy and the importance of a food council are understood and welcomed as paramount tools for improving the capacity of the territory to attract people, investments and resources.

An agreement between Castel del Giudice and the surrounding provinces could reach a population of around 800,000 people and, therefore, have an impact on a much wider socio-ecological system than the municipality alone. In this context, investing in food districts, local development, sustainable tourism and other topics, is the key to creating a path towards the formulation of an inter-regional policy that covers a territory large enough to allow a significant change in the trend of demographic development.

Even though Castel del Giudice represents a quite isolated case in the region, the intention is to join the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact as soon as the actions have started. Furthermore, the authors are promoters of the Italian Network on Local Food Policies. Castel del Giudice is one of the most recent entries in the network and it represents a pioneering experience in the Centre-South area of Italy, which has the potential to change people’s perceptions about food in marginal and inner areas.

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[www.barillacfn.com/media/material/food\\_cities.pdf](http://www.barillacfn.com/media/material/food_cities.pdf)