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The "Pergola Valdostana" and heroic viticulture in Aosta Valley (Italy): a case study on a traditional wine-growing system on terraced landscapes

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Orographic and pedoclimatic conditions in the Western Alps have deeply influenced agriculture in Aosta Valley. Vines, cultivated for over 2 millennia, are concentrated along the morainic reliefs and strongly characterize the landscape from 350 m up to over 1000 m.a.s.l.

The Interreg project "Vi.A. - Route des VignoblesAlpins", launched in 2017, aims to share methods and best practices to preserve the typical characteristics of the Alpine vineyard landscape. The grapevine cultivation systems are a fundamental element for the Aosta Valley landscape; a survey to evaluate the economic sustainability of their maintenance over time has been developed.

The monitoring mainly concerned the vines in Morgex and Donnas, where vineyards are cultivated according to the traditional "Pergola Valdostana" system, characterized by very particular support structures, a traditional and complex system of vertical and horizontal wooden frames, on small land plots, mainly on terraces.

The study focuses on terracing types, planting costs, working time, cultivation costs and different levels of mechanization achievable in the vineyard.

The first results highlight the high incidence, on total grape production costs, of the manual labour required by these cultivation systems. The context is characterized by high land fragmentation, the average farm areas measuring even less than 2000 m², and by very low mechanization. These cultivation types are not competitive if compared to the modern farming systems used in highly professional wine-growing areas, nevertheless they need to be protected. Therefore, it is essential to maintain the presence of family-owned farms, even those of very small size, for which viticulture represents just a complementary income. Local administrations must therefore adopt measures to safeguard these rural areas, implementing policies favouring agro-tourism in particular in "heroic viticulture" landscapes and supporting the small and micro farms involved, nowadays managed by an increasingly aging workforce.