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Improving the Landscape and Tourism in Marginal Areas: The Case of Land Consolidation Associations in the North-West of Italy

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Abstract: Land fragmentation is a factor that limits the development of the agricultural and forestry sector, as well as the ability of operators to reach a profitable economic dimension. This phenomenon also influences the creation of activities and incomes in a negative way in marginal areas. In this context, land consolidation associations (LCA) can be a useful tool in reducing this limitation and promoting better management of the territory by improving the link between the landscape and tourism. This study aims to make a comparison between the different LCAs operating in the north-west of Italy, with a specific focus on differences and similarities amongst LCAs, highlighting each orientation towards the management of the landscape with the purpose of improving tourism development. The research used a survey method; a questionnaire was designed, and a semi-structured interview was conducted with each LCA president. Findings show that land management by LCAs allows the preservation and/or improvement of the landscape and supports the development of agricultural activities such as animal breeding. This kind of landscape-based land management increases the attractiveness of the territory in terms of tourism, stimulating the nature-oriented tourism tools. Therefore, on the one hand, the Piedmontese model supports the landscape and also allows economic and social goals to be reached by tourism solutions, and on the other hand it stimulates the improvement of the environment and the creation of chests of biodiversity.

Keywords: land consolidation association (LCA); landscape; tourism; land fragmentation; north-west of Italy

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals, identified by the UN, are increasing in importance at the international level and involve various economic and social areas, including land management. Careful management and use of territories, even in marginal and disadvantaged areas, can lead to the achievement of objectives such as the protection of the terrestrial ecosystem, the reduction of activities that can generate climate change and the creation of useful jobs to support the prosperity of rural communities.

In order to achieve these objectives, different tools can be implemented to support and enhance the territory and landscape that are also applicable for tourism purposes. In the field of tourism management, the territory is of primary importance in satisfying three essential conditions in the development phase of a tourism project, i.e., creating the tourist experience by meeting the needs of the demand, implementing a systemic appeal that integrates operators and the territory and monitoring the dynamics between tourist supply, demand and the territory [1–7].

The territory, therefore, is of significant importance for the tourism sector, and its role becomes central from the perspective of a sustainable tourist destination in order to ensure its competitiveness over time. The territory should be managed according to criteria of effectiveness and efficiency, with the involvement of the local community in decision-making processes, even in marginal and disadvantaged rural areas [8,9].

Especially, operators have an economic and social responsibility towards the territory [10]. On the one hand, they must be aware of the quality of the territorial heritage, which is the engine for the development of the territory [5]. On the other hand, they must be able to integrate into the dynamics of the local territorial context, to make their experiential tourism offer more authentic [4,11]. The concept of experience in tourism is constantly evolving, as shown by the models relating to the experience economy and its dimensions [12] and the experience pyramid model [13,14] as well as the dimensions of the tourist experience [15]. At the same time, the concept of territory, understood as geographically, culturally and historically delimited, can be related to an economic offer proposed by one or more operators and perceived by demand as a unitary product consisting of tangible elements (e.g., agro-food products and handicrafts) and intangibles (e.g., culture, history and tradition) and perhaps further characterized by a single image or identity [16,17].

In this context, the landscape is a particular element that can distinguish a territory and its tourist appeal. The landscape is the territory filtered by culture; it is linked to the perception of a territory, determined by the dominant elements and, sometimes, can be confused with the territory. This happens because of the characteristics of its external appearance or because it is an element of social and community value [18–20]. In a rural tourism context, the landscape is often combined with the perception of the transformation of the territory caused by agriculture and its products, as in the case of the International Organization of Vine and Wine (OIV). Indeed, it defines terroir as the set of "specific soil, topography, climate, landscape characteristics and biodiversity features" that allow the unique characterization of wine products [21,22]. In many cases, the landscape and tourism represent a winning combination from an economic and social point of view and form a consolidated link in those territories that are also distinguished by well-structured businesses, such as Langhe and Monferrato in Piedmont, in the north-west of Italy [23]. The positive perception of transformations connotes a landscape worthy of conservation and enhancement.

In addition to these territories particularly suited for food and wine and landscape tourism, there are also some adjacent ones that are subject to high social and economic decline. These places are affected by the phenomena of depopulation and fragmentation of the land, which have fueled a series of limitations for agricultural and agro-pastoral farms, i.e., the reduction of the land surface necessary to produce sufficient income to maintain productive activities [24,25], the abandonment of the territory and the loss of eco-systemic services such as meadows, pastures and forests [26–29]. The territories with these kinds of problems and critical issues have been identified as marginal and are characterized by reduced economic and social development when compared to the neighboring territorial context [30,31]. At the same time, according to other currents of thought, abandonment has resulted in a re-naturalization of the landscape that alternates abandoned land with cultivated land. Spontaneous evolution is positively assessed for the formation of chests of biodiversity that had been lost with monoculture [32]. However, in general terms, the maximization of the value of ecosystems can only be ensured through planning and management processes [33]. Indeed, from the phenomenon of abandonment, diverse situations may arise and not necessarily coinciding with recoveries of biodiversity. For example, abandonment can lead to triggering erosion, runoffs and landslides or difficulties in intervening in the event of fires [34,35].

In the EU, territorial policy is oriented towards sustainable management of natural resources and socio-economic development for rural areas, also highlighting the different variations that agriculture can take on [36–42].

The EU guidelines are applied locally through the tools of rural development programs [43,44] with elements that meet the needs of each territory. A particular tool, aimed at the recovery of

fragmented land located in marginal areas, was regulated in Piedmont (north-west of Italy) in 2016 to reduce depopulation and make abandoned agricultural land productive again. This tool is named the "land consolidation association—LCA" ("Associazione Fondiaria" in Italian). This approach allows functionally small portions of abandoned land owned by different parties to be joined in order to stimulate the development of new entrepreneurial agricultural activities and therefore create employment in marginal areas. In Italy, LCA initiatives are not very widespread, but the Piedmontese regulation stimulated the start of the activities of the associations. Indeed, the Piedmont area is characterized by the largest number of LCAs in Italy, equal to 16. These associations are active and operate in the area to recover the largest possible area of land, giving rise to different types of activities.

Given the importance of land management, these associations seem to be a useful tool to achieve different goals both in an environmental context, i.e., safeguarding of the ecosystem and landscape, and in a socio-economic sense, i.e., the ability to produce income. The purpose of this study is therefore to make a comparison between the different LCAs, with a focus on the objectives and the end use of the consolidated land of each association. Moreover, differences and similarities between the cases examined are analyzed, highlighting a feasible orientation towards the transformation of the landscape with the purpose of tourism development of the territory.

This paper is organized into different sections. The first presents the main references on land fragmentation and related tools to reduce this phenomenon. The second outlines the case study and methodology used in the scope of this research. The third presents main findings obtained by data analysis. The fourth discusses the results and indicates the main issues related to landscape and tourism connection. Lastly, the fifth presents final considerations.

2. Literature Review

The consolidation of a territory is an important measure of management that is applied as a solution to the fragmentation of the territory. This approach allows a reorganization of space, with a new structure owned by the territory in terms of plots and land owners and the supply of adequate infrastructures [45–47]. The most important land consolidation approach is defined as land banking. Jack Damen was the first to define the concept of land banking as structural acquisition and temporary management of land in rural areas by a state agency, with the aim of renting or redistributing land to improve the agricultural structure or reallocating land for purposes with a public interest [48]. This definition underlines the importance of public intervention in the consolidation of fragmented soils [49], and many studies show the results of its implementation [50–54].

In addition to the public institution intervention, a second approach can be carried out. It consists of the initiative by the landowners who can stimulate the process of consolidation of the territory by joining their lands with the aim of operating cooperative agriculture with the common cultivation of land by a group of farmers [55,56]. This approach tends to be efficient if, through the voluntary exchange of land between the landowners, the neighboring lots of each landowner can be grouped.

The main objective seems to be that of the competitiveness of agricultural systems with the improvement of performance, e.g., productivity and related increase in profits. However, in geographical areas such as Europe, this objective can be combined with others that create value and wealth and are not directly related to agricultural production. European rural development policy is closely related to improving land management and the environment [57,58].

The orientation towards wider objectives leads to the involvement of various factors that allow identifying other objectives, such as improving the living conditions of rural populations [59,60], the improvement of sales practices and enhancement of local products [61–64] and the integrated exploitation of human, natural and cultural resources, including landscape heritage [65–68]. In the latter case, the landscape is an integral part of the tourist experience even when it is mainly oriented towards the knowledge of the typical agricultural products of the place, and the combination of the two elements can make the destination a unique area [69]. The link between food, the landscape and other elements, such as culture and environment, can create experiences and influence the tourist

choice [70–73]. Often, the landscape is an essential element in enhancing the food and wine tourism experience [74–78]. In addition, it is also an integral part of the tourist appeal in specific territorial areas such as in the case of UNESCO sites [23,65,79].

At the same time, the landscape can assume a particular value in marginal areas that tend to have a high naturalistic quality, which is perceived as an aspect of high growth potential in tourist terms [80,81]. In marginal areas, the landscape of a territory can be shaped by sustainable development policies through the support of initiatives aimed at the recovery of traditional agricultural activities, the protection of the environment and biodiversity. The result that can be obtained is a landscape as a fundamental vector of tourist attraction, which, in some cases, is the identity image of the territory itself [82]. At the same time, the landscape can be considered a tourist resource hampered by infrastructure limits, e.g., a lack of accommodation facilities and inadequate communication routes, which do not allow the tourism sector to develop [83]. Sometimes, the existence of areas with high quality natural and agricultural landscapes may not be associated with adequate tourism development, as well as areas where high tourism development is not associated with an appreciable quality of the landscape [84]. In some cases, tourism has developed to the point of generating unwanted effects that have led to changes in the landscape and, more generally, in the ecosystem [85].

In conclusion, farms operating in harsh environments, such as marginal areas, are uncovered to the effects of many environmental and climatic limitations that reduce the creation and development of activities. Territorial policies tend to mitigate these limitations by supporting initiatives aimed at revitalizing the productive, social and cultural structure, in order to strengthen and safeguard these territories [28]. Land fragmentation is a factor that limits the development of the agricultural and forestry sector, as well as the ability of individual companies to reach an adequate economic dimension by diversifying and expanding their income-related activities. The LCAs can therefore contribute to the reduction of these limitations and support better management of the territory, also from a tourism point of view.

3. Methodology

The LCA phenomenon was treated as a case study. A comparison was made among the various associations established in the Piedmont area with a focus on their objectives and intended use of the consolidated land of each individual association, highlighting any discrepancies and/or similarities [86–90]. There are 16 LCAs in Piedmont, 15 of which are already active and operating in their areas of competence. All associations were contacted, and the 15 active ones participated in the study (Table 1). The Association of Sestriere declined the invitation to participate as, at the time of the investigation, it had just formed.

As already pointed out, the purpose of this study is the comparison between the associations to verify and understand a possible relationship between the transformation of the landscape and the tourist development of territories. In order to achieve this objective, the analysis was structured in three phases. The first was dedicated to the creation of the questionnaire, on the basis of a careful and complete bibliographic analysis aimed at identifying the specificities of the LCAs and the related opportunities resulting from their activation. The second was dedicated to the application of individual interviews to collect information from different presidents of the LCAs. The third was the analysis and comparison of the information collected in order to consolidate the possible combination of safeguarding the landscape and tourism development within marginal territories.

The questionnaire was designed to allow the interview of the 15 LCA presidents and collect the necessary information to be processed. The contents of the questionnaire considered all the studies carried out on the LCA theme, with particular attention to the analyses dedicated to the relevance of this management tool in the area [91].

Table 1. Operating land consolidation associations.

No.	Association Name	Founded	Municipality	No. Associates	Surface Consolidated (ha)
1	Alpe Sorbella	2017	Rassa	484	235
2	Avolasca	2012	Avolasca	25	-
3	Caldirola	2013	Fabbrica Curone	20	200
4	Carnino	2012	Briga Alta	20	24
5	Cornalin	2014	Lauriano, Tonengo	30	150
6	I Menou	2015	Melle	50	100
7	La Chiara	2016	Usseglio	34	15
8	Macra	2014	Macra	30	350
9	Montemale	2013	Montemale	70	100
10	Paradiso	2018	Mompantero	70	15
11	Ritorno ai prati	2013	Ostana	35	25
12	Stroppo	2016	Stroppo	30	33
13	Thures	2017	Cesana Torinese	32	271
14	Upega	2013	Briga Alta	35	140
15	Valli libere	2018	Rittana	9	20

A first version of the interview was created and assessed by a group of experts to detect any structural weaknesses. The group was composed of four university researchers, experts on land consolidation, ecosystem management and tourism. A final version was then carried out. It was divided into three parts; the first was dedicated to assessing main items as to LCAs that emerged from the literature review, i.e., strengths and opportunities, with a 1–7 point Likert scale (Table 2). The second part was dedicated to open questions on particular issues, i.e., perception of ecosystem improvement and assessment of end use. The third part was dedicated to LCA data (see also Appendix A).

This study used a survey with an individual interview method to improve the knowledge of LCA implementation. This method allows goals to be reached and can more efficiently generate an in-depth analysis on the landscape and tourism topic. In this case, individual interviews are very useful for collecting all observations from presidents of the associations because interviewees sometimes do not like to share their own ideas with others, and this technique is a tool to bypass their hesitancy and diffidence. In this context, the individual interview method was the most useful tool to identify feasible destinations of consolidated land, evidencing the link between the landscape and tourism. This technique was applied to investigate LCA issues by interviewing all presidents of the associations. They can be identified as the main experts on the basis of their knowledge and closeness as to the topic of the study. Therefore, a total of 15 LCA presidents were involved.

This study was structured as a survey, with an individual semi-structured interview per each expert [92]. All presidents replied to the semi-structured interview [93] during the summer of 2018. Each president was contacted to set a date and time for the interview. The study aimed to collect information requested and, sometimes, extra data in line with other authors [94]. The interviews lasted from 60 to 150 min. The interviews were recorded and main topics noted by the interviewers.

Lastly, the collected information was divided up equally between the authors, who analyzed it separately so as not to influence one another [95]. Furthermore, the analysis results were compared and the main points identified.

Table 2. Strengths and opportunities that emerged from the literature review.

Strengths	**Definition**
Innovative integration of various territorial areas	Union between neighboring territories and communities
Positive environmental impacts	Land management produces a better balance between nature and man
Practicable guidelines	Identification of guidelines for a replicability of land management
Recovery of sustainable cultivation systems	Re-introduction of environmental-friendly cultivation methods
Improvement of the quality of life of the members	The community of the association benefits from the positive externalities generated by the management of the territory
Opportunities	
Increasing the spread of sustainable forms of agriculture on aggregate land	Agricultural activities shared between different agricultural land properties
Public funding opportunities	Interventions in the territory and management of the agricultural area with participation in financing
Interventions in the territory with the tourist destination	Management of the territory for any tourist purposes
Conservation of biodiversity	Safeguarding nature
Active recovery of new agricultural land	Consolidated agricultural land increases and returns to being productive
Multifunctional use of the recovered surfaces	The land can also be used for activities other than cultivation, e.g., coppice, pasture, nature reserve
Increasing the fertility of the soil	Cultivation practices aimed at improving chemical, physical and biological characteristics
Involvement of other owners due to an increase in the UAA (Utilised Agricultural Area)	Virtuous effect for which the unique management of the land leads other owners to confer their own land
Common brand for agro-food production	creation of a sign of quality to differentiate food products made in the territory of associations
Reduction of plant protection by integrated companies	Reduction of the use of synthetic products in agricultural land consolidated

4. Results

The first part of the interview aimed to evaluate items with a positive value that the LCAs have already generated and may be able to generate. With reference to the first group, the items identified with the review concern the estimated strengths (Table 2). Based on the experience gained by the presidents, all the items examined obtained positive results with a median between 6 and 7.

The positive environmental impacts and the innovative integration of several territorial areas obtained the highest averages, respectively 6.47 and 6.33, highlighting an easier understanding of the advantage generated by the interviewees. In fact, these items obtained an evaluation from all the interviewees characterized by a certain homogeneity with rather limited variances. The other items, on the other hand, were characterized by a lower homogeneity in the assigned assessments and in their overall number. These were practical guidelines, resumption of sustainable cultivation

systems and improvement of the quality of life of the members. In the latter cases, there was a lack of implementation of cultivation systems in consolidated soils (3 respondents), an inability to identify viable guidelines (3 respondents) and a lack of any improvements in quality of life (1 respondent) (Table 3).

Table 3. Evaluation of the strengths of the land consolidation associations.

Item	No.	Average	Median	Variance
Innovative integration of various territorial areas	15	6.33	7.00	0.95
Positive environmental impacts	15	6.47	7.00	1.12
Practicable guidelines	12	6.08	7.00	1.90
Recovery of sustainable cultivation systems	12	5.75	6.00	2.20
Improvement of the quality of life of the members	14	5.21	6.00	2.49

The second group of items consists of the opportunities generated by the activity carried out by the LCA, which, according to the literature, would be obtainable (Table 2) but have not yet been verified. Based on the considerations of the respondents, most of these items seem to be considered positively, with a median of 7 for eight out of 10 items.

Respondents seem to perceive the idea of a greater diffusion of sustainable forms of agriculture and interventions aimed at improving the tourist attractiveness of the managed territory and believe that the aggregation may also lead to more funding opportunities. They also consider positively the conservation of biodiversity, the active recovery of new agricultural land, the multifunctional use of consolidated surfaces, the increase soil fertility and the involvement of other owners with an increasing level of misalignment in the assessments. The establishment of a common brand to be dedicated to consolidated soil products does not seem to meet the favor of respondents with a strong divergence between the various assessments. The reduction of pesticides in the productive management of agricultural land deserves a separate discussion: two of the three respondents were unable to assign a value, since in the land-managed areas, the use of synthetic products is reduced to the essentials, and therefore it would be impossible to achieve a further reduction (Table 4).

Table 4. Evaluation of the opportunities generated by the land consolidation associations.

Item	No.	Average	Median	Variance
Increasing the spread of sustainable forms of agriculture on aggregate land	15	6.50	7.00	1.04
Public funding opportunities	15	6.33	7.00	1.10
Interventions in the territory with tourist destination	15	6.33	7.00	1.10
Conservation of biodiversity	15	6.33	7.00	2.10
Active recovery of new agricultural land	15	6.20	7.00	1.89
Multifunctional use of the recovered surfaces	15	6.07	7.00	1.92
Increasing the fertility of the soil	15	6.00	7.00	3.00
Involvement of other owners due to an increase in the UAA	15	5.33	7.00	4.81
Common brand for agro-food production	15	4.33	4.00	4.10
Reduction of plant protection by integrated companies	5	7.00	7.00	-

The second part of the interview was dedicated to the analysis of the potential of the territory according to the natural heritage and its possible intended use, in order to obtain a useful income for the community. All the presidents agreed in supporting the same fundamental motivation for the associations' establishment, i.e., better land management. The shared idea, indeed, consists of

considering the associated management of fragmented land properties and uncultivated or abandoned agricultural land a necessary tool for the protection of the environment and landscape, for the prevention of hydrogeological and fire risks. Based on this principle, all respondents highlighted another opportunity, considered as secondary, which consists of also enhancing the consolidated territory with economic value, i.e., a management oriented towards agricultural activities and/or tourist accommodation.

A total of 14 respondents identify as a priority the development of activities dedicated to the breeding of animals suitable for grazing even in semi-wild states such as horses, cattle and/or sheep. In one case, a semi-wild pig farm was implemented. The majority have farms already operating in the area, and the acquisition of land seems oriented towards increasing the economic value of activities already in progress, for the benefit of all members. In three cases, the intended use of the land was oriented towards animal breeding, but at the time of the interview, there was no presence of a company in operation.

A total of 10 respondents highlighted the importance of managing the territory to preserve and/or improve the landscape by increasing the attractiveness in terms of tourism. Landscape-based land management, indeed, enhances the cleaning of paths and undergrowth, allows farm animals to reclaim nature and, therefore, stimulates tourism activities such as hospitality. In particular, the tourist-oriented proposals are different, i.e., agritourist activities, horseback riding, hiking and more generally outdoor activities, with the possibility of approaching ancient rural activities in a didactic way, such as sheep farming and dairy produce.

The cultivation of fruit and vegetables is an end use shared by seven respondents that seems to be mostly an alternative to breeding and in any case linked to the soil and climatic conditions of the land involved. A further respondent, given the particular environmental conditions of the managed area, highlighted forestry as a tool for producing income. Finally, some respondents underlined the socio-economic value of associated management in addition to generating new jobs, through the creation and/or setting up of farms (4 respondents) and the importance for strengthening social cohesion in the community. Many respondents feel this aspect has a desirable positive effect, but only a total of four respondents highlighted an effective manifestation in their communities (Table 5).

Table 5. End use of territorial associate management by land consolidation associations.

End Use	Land Consolidation Association No.
Breeding	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,12,13,14,15
Grazing land	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,12,13,14,15
Landscape	1,2,3,4,6,7,9,10,12,14
Tourism	1,2,3,4,6,7,9,10,12,14
Agriculture	5,7,8,10,11,13,15
New jobs	1,11,13,15
Social cohesion	4,5,11,13
Forestry (wood)	2

5. Discussion

As already indicated, the rational management of the territory is a fundamental element of achieving the objectives for sustainable development. Even marginal and disadvantaged areas can contribute to the protection of the environment and to the development of activities that are less impactful from an environmental point of view, improving the quality of life of rural populations.

In this context, the land associations can provide the tools for sustainable development of the territory concerned, as well as from a long-term perspective. Sustainable land management immediately takes on environmental, social and even economic value. The care of natural beauty and the return to nature of farm animals allows a coherent management of the territory that also positively affects the tourist flow.

The land associations have as their purpose the planning and implementation of a land management plan capable of identifying its potential and producing technical and economic solutions to enhance agricultural and forestry production and for the conservation of the environment and landscape. This value proposition of the associations convinced the owners of abandoned and/or uncultivated land to join, with the aim of promoting the use and conservation of the production potential and value of the landscape in those areas.

The investigation carried out validated what emerged from the literature [91]. With reference to the strengths identified, the respondents tended to agree upon them. Combining land in a rational and coordinated way generates benefits that the whole community can utilize, such as the cleaning of the territory or the distribution of income or goods generated from consolidated land [50,55,56]. In addition, it can activate virtuous mechanisms of territorial integration for the benefit of an enlarged community that can extend beyond the association's borders. Social cohesion and the benefits generated lead to a noticeable improvement in the quality of life of the members of the community [50,59] by amplifying the possibility of replicating the model in other rural areas. Another positive aspect concerns the environmental benefits that can pass through the reintroduction of "forgotten" cultivation practices of abandoned or uncultivated land and the rapprochement of man with nature. These elements also allow a return to the almost forgotten traditions and to that authenticity as it is understood by the older generations.

In relation to the opportunities that can be generated by the associated management of marginal and uncultivated land, respondents underline the importance of public support in associations through dedicated aid, highlighting the need for at least initial support from the institutions, in line with the requests of the rural world [49,50]. Land associations also have the ability to amplify the multifunctionality of consolidated land, in line with rural policies [36], which allow food production [61] and visibility of the usable aesthetic landscape element, as well as in tourism terms [67]. In particular, interventions aimed at improving the tourist service, such as paths for hikers and/or cycle paths for cyclists, possibly supported by external funding, are hoped for. The combination of landscape elements, food production and structures dedicated to tourism would therefore allow the creation of experiences that recall tradition and authenticity [66,70] and the consequent generation of value on the spot.

Lastly, results show that the presidents of LCAs assign a high value to the naturalistic heritage and landscape according to their destination in tourism terms, in line with other authors [80,81]. The belonging of managed land to marginal areas should not be considered a limit [83] or a threat [85] but, if anything, an opportunity that must necessarily pass through a rational use of the territory, mainly supported by agricultural and pastoral activities.

6. Conclusions and Limitations

The territory offers many useful elements for increasing the number of visitors, tourists and/or customers, which varies according to the type of offer and/or context. The historical–cultural and environmental resources allow the activation of virtuous systems among the elements that compose them. Territory, landscape and tourism lead to the creation of experiences, useful means for increasing and spreading the value of the territory.

In this context, the present study analyzed the potential of the LCA, an important tool for collective management of the territory, in consideration of the relationship between the landscape and tourism. Indeed, LCAs revitalize the agro-forestry–pastoral activities and the relative production, supporting the benefits generated, as well as in the landscape setting. The collective improvement of the elements that make up the territory encourages the flow of potential tourists and stimulates the activation of new, focused services. Furthermore, the LCAs induce the reactivation of ties within the community; this type of initiative works when a participatory process is generated by the whole community, i.e., municipal administrations, landowners, citizens, agro-pastoral farms.

Therefore, an LCA is a tool dedicated to the management of fragmented territories and can be considered an opportunity for rural communities who wish to stimulate and revitalize their ability to produce environmental, economic and social value.

The survey carried out shows that the Piedmontese model can obtain results both in landscape–environmental and in economic-social terms and can be considered a replicable model, provided that some organizational barriers such as the complete bestowal by the individual owners' lands to the area of interest is obtained, through the involvement of all members of the community.

However, Piedmontese land associations are relatively young institutions. Expected results with a social value, such as recreating the social tissue of rural communities or stimulating shared planning and participatory mechanisms, can take a long time to consolidate and to produce advantages with a certain stability.

At the same time, the economic spillovers, as far as ascertained, are still difficult to quantify precisely. Let us consider, for example, the use of consolidated land for tourism or grazing purposes, the revenues of which are determined by a set of elements of which the consolidated land is just one of, or the economic value generated by the formation of "treasure chests" of biodiversity whose economic value is invaluable. In this sense, therefore, this study, while confirming the beneficial effects of the establishment of land associations, highlights the main limitation of the impossibility, at the moment, of being able to measure these effects with certainty from a purely monetary point of view.

To conclude, this study and related findings are able to provide some information to help LCAs and their presidents improve their activities in marginal areas. The collected information has some limitations determined, on the one hand, by the brief period of activity of LCAs with a specific location concentrated in the north-west of Italy that do not allowed a comparison with other areas where similar initiatives are rare. On the other hand, some Piedmontese LCA initiatives have been activated in recent times and, currently, their assessments are partial and limited. However, these results are the basis of lengthy research dedicated to LCAs and their evolution. Future development will focus on the analysis of the socio-economic dimension over a defined period of time.

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Appendix A

Main survey questions.
The questionnaire was organized into parts as explained in "Materials and methods".
FIRST PART—STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES
Respondents were asked to answer, using a seven-point Likert scale, to the statements in the following table. Moreover, respondents could add further indications for each item (the "I do not know" answer included evidencing motivations).

Strengths
Innovative integration of various territorial areas
Positive environmental impacts
Practicable guidelines
Recovery of sustainable cultivation systems
Improvement of the quality of life of the members
Opportunities
Increasing the spread of sustainable forms of agriculture on aggregate land
Public funding opportunities
Interventions in the territory with tourist destination
Conservation of biodiversity
Active recovery of new agricultural land
Multifunctional use of the recovered surfaces
Increasing the fertility of the soil
Involvement of other owners due to an increase in the UAA
Common brand for agro-food production
Reduction of plant protection by integrated companies

SECOND PART—PERCEPTION OF ECOSYSTEM IMPROVEMENT AND ASSESSMENT OF END USE
This part was structured in the following open questions.

- What is the main end use of your land consolidation association, currently?
- In addition to the main end use, are there secondary/complementary uses?
- What benefits are obtained for the territory by land consolidation association activities?
- Can the benefits you identify create additional indirect ones? If so, which ones?

THIRD PART—LAND CONSOLIDATION ASSOCIATION INFORMATION
In this case, the following information was requested.
Association name; year of foundation; location (municipality); number of associates; surface consolidated (ha); web site.

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