

## **Beyond economic growth. For the protection of biodiversity and food resilience.**

ISPRA Webinar on 5.11.2021

The concepts of transitions and transformations towards sustainability are gradually taking on a central role in science and politics. On a European scale, the transition narrative has contributed to the definition of the most ambitious and comprehensive policy framework ever, aimed at addressing the challenges of the environment and sustainability: the European Green Deal and the subsequent Strategies deriving from it. The European Green Deal aims to realize this vision by integrating sustainability into all EU policies and achieving climate and environmental goals by 2030 and 2050. However, incremental change is no longer an option, particularly for achieving long-term goals, and more fundamental changes in lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production are required to achieve sustainability goals. Such fundamental transformations require reflections on the principles, paradigms and narratives that shape our collective and individual action. The occurrence of the COVID-19 crisis has increased the sense of urgency to make this transformation concrete, reminding us that sustainability and change are intrinsically linked and that a fundamental (or transformative) change is possible, especially in response to threats perceived as imminent. It also reminded us that (old) normality is undesirable and that, to become sustainable, our societies must stop many of their usual practices. However, achieving fundamental change will be difficult and will involve painful trade-offs. In this context and based on a wide range of results, the EEA (European Environmental Agency) has launched the editorial series "Narratives for Change", with the aim of bringing to the fore new prospective studies on transition factors, to strengthen social dialogue on alternatives to dominant paradigms and to allow reflection and action through debates. Seminars aimed at bringing together multiple perspectives and skills to explore and discuss ways to move European societies away from the old and unsustainable normality has followed the publication of "narratives" within the series. As part of this series, the narrative "[Growth without economic growth](#)" was published in 2021. To discuss and deepen the contents of the article, ISPRA held on November 5, 2021, the seminar "[Beyond economic growth. For the protection of biodiversity and food resilience](#)". The study's key messages are as follows.

- Declining biodiversity, climate change and pollution are highly dependent on economic activities and economic growth.
- The complete “decoupling” between economic growth and resource consumption would not seem possible.
- The circularity of the economy at 100% is not physically possible; if circularity measures continue to fuel economic growth by increasing overall material and energy consumption, they may not lead to sustainability.
- The doughnut economy, post-growth and degrowth are alternatives to mainstream conceptions of economic growth, which can offer valuable insights and insights.
- The European Green Deal and other policy initiatives for a sustainable future require not only technological changes, but, above all, changes in consumption and social practices.

- Growth is culturally, politically and institutionally rooted. Change requires us to address these barriers in a democratic way. The various communities that live in a simple way offer inspiration for social innovation.

This EEA activity comes at a crucial time for the EU, called to face challenges and opportunities for fundamental change. What could be achieved in terms of progress if the European Green Deal were implemented with the aim of inspiring citizens, communities and businesses to create innovative social practices with low environmental impact and aimed at social well-being and personal growth? To answer this question, the ISPRA seminar focuses on the agricultural and food sector. In fact, scientific evidence indicates that agricultural and food systems are the major drivers of alteration of bio-geophysical processes on a planetary scale, at the source of the climate crisis and of the erosion of biodiversity (basis of the food systems themselves) and that it is a transformative change is needed as a function of sustainability. The "Farm to Fork" and "Biodiversity for 2030" Strategies, the Common Agricultural Policy and other EU policy initiatives for a sustainable future call for transformations in the production and consumption of food, fiber, wood and the use of resources.

In this sense, ISPRA's [systemic studies on food wastage and resilience](#) indicate, in harmony with the EEA analyzes, the need to study narratives, scenarios and structural transformation strategies in an interdisciplinary way. For insights, see [here](#) (Italian) and the [technical Report](#) with an English summary. The challenge in the coming years will be to bring these analysis and insights into mainstream policy processes to consider how they can be effectively operational in support of sustainability goals. The seminar focused on three key speeches and on two round tables to discuss the topics presented. It was opened by the institutional greetings of ISPRA President Stefano Laporta who recalled the commitment of ISPRA in the framework of international conventions and European policies to address the major global environmental problems, such as the "Biodiversity for 2030" and "Farm to Fork" strategies. Subsequently Roberta Pignatelli, Country Desk Officer of the EEA, highlighted the importance of this seminar on the new paradigms, in the context of the existing collaborations between the EEA and ISPRA, including the Eionet network for the exchange of data and analysis, hoping for the consolidation of partnerships and networks, which is one of the strategic objectives of the EEA.

Luca Mercalli of the Italian Meteorological Society and member of the ISPRA Scientific Council [retraced and updated](#) the historical context relating to the limits of growth and the urgency to address them, recalling the exemplary figure of an illustrious thinker such as Aurelio Peccei. Later Lorenzo Benini of the EEA [presented](#) the briefing paper "Growth without economic growth" of which he is the author. Benini recalled the key messages of the article and therefore highlighted the opportunity to also consider new reference paradigms and the need to redefine the prevailing idea of progress in the direction of social practices and simple communities with non-materialistic fundamental values.

The [presentation](#) by Giulio Vulcano of ISPRA then focused with a systemic approach on the application of this framework to related and fundamental topics for environmental policies such as the "convivial conservation of biodiversity" and the socio-ecological achievement of food resilience. It proposes [analysis and strategies](#) for a structural and participatory transformation oriented towards cooperative networks of agroecological, local, solidarity and small-scale food systems that can prevent wastage and impacts.

The two round tables then discussed how to redesign food systems in Italy through the development of agroecological methods for human well-being and environmental protection: the first involved institutional actors and farmers' organizations, while the second the world of research and that of civil society. The first round table was moderated by Lorenzo Ciccarese of ISPRA who also introduced the scientific-negotiation process under the UN Convention for Biodiversity, which will have to end with the approval of the Global Framework for Biodiversity for post 2020. The draft now under discussion considers new paradigms of reference in the conceptual framework (Theory of Change) and expressly cites the need to change the way of using and managing biological resources and to integrate the instrumental and relational value of nature in production processes. Professor Lorenzo Fioramonti, Deputy and former Minister for Research, explored some of the economic models for policies geared primarily to human well-being and environmental protection, based on the value of human resources and public research. Sandra Corsi of FAO, the United Nations organization for agriculture and food, focused on some innovations in development cooperation to tackle climate change, which seriously endangers global food security. Prof. Angelo Riccaboni, president of the PRIMA program and member of the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASVIS), described the framework of the sustainability of Italian agriculture, the future challenges for the Mediterranean countries and the need for access to innovation. Francesco Giardina of Coldiretti noted that the most sustainable solutions, including the development of the short supply chain, are currently the most problematic to pursue and which should therefore be facilitated, also as regards the development of skills. Alessandra Turco, of the Italian Rural Association and the international movement Via Campesina, emphasized the need for self-reliance, the protection of small peasant agriculture and guaranteeing access to food and land, also thanks to the equal exchange of skills. Pietro Nicolai of the Italian Farmers Confederation (CIA) presented agricultural practices related to training, control and biological defense of plants, highlighting the importance of pilot experiences. Donato Rotundo of Confagricoltura described sustainability practices related to the enhancement of internal areas, short supply chains, energy communities and social agriculture, with an emphasis on increasing self-supply and sustainability.

In the second round table session moderated by Giulio Vulcano of ISPRA, the perspectives of researchers and civic associations on the structural transformation of food systems and on the contributions that the participating networks can bring were discussed. Federico Demaria of the University of Barcelona has expanded the scenario of international research on ecological macroeconomics and [degrowth](#) with attention to the role of agroecology and equitable social innovation, for example with the European project Horizon [Prospera](#).

Mario Giampietro of the Autonomous University of Barcelona stressed the need to resolve some central issues including the marginality of agriculture in relative economic terms, which neglects the importance of its ecological and social functions, the pressure of urban dynamics on rural contexts, excessive dependence on imports, recalling among others the results of the European [Magic-Nexus](#) project and the site <https://uncomfortableknowledge.com>. Salvatore Ceccarelli, researcher and international consultant in biodiversity and resilient agriculture has shown the value, both for the environment and for health, of popular participatory and evolutionary genetic improvement techniques centered on diversity and the activation of agroecological dissemination networks. Margherita Ciervo of the Interdisciplinary Observatory on Bioeconomy has brought attention to the definition of bioeconomy and innovation policies on consistency with original biophysical principles and criteria such as those of low entropy, sufficiency, regeneration and ecological effectiveness to avoid

paradoxical effects. Lucia Cuffaro of the “Movimento per la Decrescita Felice” (“Movement for happy degrowth”) described the environmental implications of a wide range of good practices and organizations that bring resilient grassroots innovation into large sectors of society. Jason Nardi of the Italian Network of Solidarity Economy focused on the need for agroecological relocation of food policies, reconnecting them to real needs in the territories with the balance and collaboration between urban and rural areas.

There was also an extensive written debate among the participants who attended the seminar live. Some interventions underlined the need for in-depth analysis of well-being indicators and the regional declination of general guidelines, for which the National System for Environmental Protection (SNPA) can also play a role. ISPRA Director General Alessandro Bratti carried out the conclusions of the seminar starting from the evolution of the current framework of environmental policies and sustainable development, avoiding the excesses of the prevailing models. He stressed that from this appointment emerges the shared need to deepen the complex discourse on sustainability and to create a greater number of opportunities for comparison and application projects dedicated to the many interconnected issues addressed during the discussion. He therefore looks to future steps to enhance the ongoing collaborations between ISPRA, SNPA and EEA and to develop new workshop spaces and possible open study partnerships that can also be useful for innovating decision-making processes.