



Article

# The Contribution of Immigrants to Multifunctional Agricultural Systems in Italy

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the role of immigrants within farms and is framed within constructivist approaches to the analysis of immigrants in rural areas. The aim of the paper is to analyse migrants' contributions to building up multifunctional agricultural systems. To achieve this purpose, a sound empirical analysis is carried out, built on the profile of farms employing immigrants, with special reference to three indicators: the style of farming, territorial localisation of farming activity and the qualification held by the immigrant employed in the farm. The results of analysis confirm a diversified range of contribution on behalf of migrants, with strong diversification on the basis of workers' provenance. The results of the study suggest that an adequate policy action targeted to the immigrants may bring about positive effects in terms of multifunctionality building at both the individual and territorial level.

**Keywords:** immigrants; agriculture system; multifunctionality

## 1. Introduction

The impact of international migration in rural areas is a relatively recent field of research [1]. This paper deals with the role of immigrants within farms, with the purpose of analysing their contribution in building up multifunctional agricultural systems. Migration processes may involve multiple temporalities (temporally continuous international movements) and spatialities (different destination countries) [2]. Most of the studies on immigration in the EU focus either on individuals' vulnerability in rural areas [3] and on the impact of immigrants in urban metropolitan areas, thereby neglecting their role in the agricultural sector [4–6]. Furthermore, migration in rural Europe contributed to redesigning rural areas, above all in peripheral areas marked by youth outmigration and processes of marginalisation of rural economies. Consequently, migration can be a pre-requisite for rural economic regeneration [7].

As suggested by Søholt et al. [8], diversification of mobility flows may contribute to transform the demographic and ethnic profile of rural peripheral areas.

Considering this background, our paper adheres to a constituent perspective of the immigrants' role in designing patterns of multifunctional agriculture. More precisely, we support the idea that immigrants' contribution to value creation and to multifunctionality may be relevant both as simple work supplied and in terms of entrepreneurship [9–11].

Literature has paid a growing attention to the immigration phenomenon in rural areas, by emphasising its importance in specific rural businesses that would otherwise be unviable [12]. As a matter of fact, empirical analyses describe the involvement of migrant workers in prevalently seasonal,

labour-intensive and unskilled duties [13], and by identifying ‘immigrant niches’ [14]. However, relatively recent experiences of transition towards rural entrepreneurship witness the potential role of immigrants in building up patterns of modern rurality [15,16]. Set against this background, agricultural economics literature has neglected the connections between multifunctional agriculture and territorial agricultural systems marked by the presence of immigrant workers. Moreover, the relevance, or the degree of multifunctionality activated by the presence of immigrant workers is a relatively new field of research that deserves more attention in order to make their presence less precarious and more stable [17]. Consequently, this paper tries to fill a gap in the literature, with the purpose of putting forward a methodology which permits us to evaluate the degree of activation of multifunctionality in farms with immigrants.

To this end, the paper is articulated as follows: after a brief recognition of literature (Part 2), we will describe the methodology of analysis (Part 3) then moving towards the results (Part 4), discussion and some conclusions will end the paper.

## 2. Literature Review

This part provides a brief literature review. The specific aim is to describe the main theoretical approaches on the topic of immigrant work, and highlight eventual gaps our paper may fill.

Despite immigration usually being considered an urban phenomenon, a rising share of immigrants has started settling in rural areas [18]. Therefore, recent literature analyses the presence of immigrant workers in rural contexts under two different perspectives. The first one focuses on the immigrant under different social and political perspectives. As a matter of fact, research have analysed political and legal characteristics of migrants [19], their visa status [20]; other scholars have emphasised the immigrant’s role as a demographic “filler/emptier”, or the underlying lock-in effects engendered by out-migration phenomena [21,22].

A second pillar in literature we define as “constructivist” takes the immigrants as actors of local development, under different points of view, within the “here and there” perspective, that is either in the country of origin and in the destination country [23,24]. According to these studies, rural migrants may affect rural places and “generate the complexities of rural population change” ([4], p. 259). Shucksmith [25] points out the importance of mobility in shaping rural territories within neo-endogenous models of territorial development, that assume local development as being boosted by both internal and external factors/agents [26–28]. In this perspective, “*In-migrants are important ‘neo-endogenous facilitators’ drawing new information and knowledge into rural areas through their extra-local networks*” [29] (p. 256). This happens through processes of immigrants embedding themselves in the local community [29,30]. Patterns of embedding may follow different trajectories, on account of a diversified set of interactions among actors, bringing about complex mechanisms of knowledge anchoring [31], that resembles “diaspora knowledge networks” [32], but that can also generate a precarious rural cosmopolitanism [17]. Consequently, McAreavey [33], in his analysis of pattern and processes of migration in rural peripheral areas, uses the expression of “migration kaleidoscope”. Set against this background, more positive approaches have gained ground, by emphasising the role of immigrants on economic development and business creation [34]. Moreover, Friberg et al. [35] underline the importance of ethnicity as skill. Following this theoretical strand, research and empirical analyses have been recently carried out, with the purpose of demonstrating the impact of immigrants on agricultural systems under various perspectives. For example, Kalantaridis and Bika [34] demonstrate the positive impact of in-migrants in terms of both business and job creation. Similarly, Bosworth [36] underlines how a relevant share of job creation in rural North-East England is owned by immigrants. Moreover, starting from low-qualified jobs, changing ethnic employment hierarchies have been empirically demonstrated in some Nordic countries [35]. Therefore, the multifunctional role of immigrants in rural areas has been underlined, under both demographic and productive perspectives [37].

With reference to the Italian case, Baldoni et al. [38] and Macrì [39] analyse migrants' impacts on labour productivity in agriculture. Likewise, Coderoni et al. [40] highlight the relationships between strategies of farms' diversification in presence of immigrants; while Cristaldi and Leonardi [41] provide evidence of immigrants' role within alternative food networks, more precisely within short food supply chains. Other authors focus on aggregation processes among migrant workers through processes of "ethnic enclaves" [42], or local business association [29]. In specific areas, like southern Italy, the presence of immigrants has become relevant, within agricultural territorial systems constrained by limits of farms' size and criticalities attributable to low quality of infrastructures and transport systems. As pointed out in the last report by Svimez [43] on southern Italian agriculture, multifunctional agriculture may be considered to be an alternative path for supporting agricultural development, above all in remote rural areas. Therefore, the presence of immigrants could be mulled over and re-framed along the lines of multifunctionality.

Our paper is based on a constructivist perspective and is drawn on its relational perspective [24], with a special reference to work relationships in farming activity.

This field of research has been recently developed with the purpose of putting at the centre of the analysis working relations between migrants and rural enterprises and experiences of immigrants' exploitation in the farms. By adhering to a constructivist approach, our paper tries to analyse the aptitude to value creation by in-migrant workers along the path of multifunctional agriculture. Literature has emphasised the role of immigrants for sustaining the multifunctional character of rural areas, with reference to multiple sectors absorbing immigrant workers in peripheral rural contexts [4]. Nonetheless, little attention has been given to the migrants' role in building up multifunctional agricultural systems. Therefore, the paper tries to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the contribution to multifunctional agriculture provided by in-migrant workers.

### 3. Territorial Anchoring of In-Migrant Workers and Multifunctional Agricultural Systems

Multifunctional agriculture is a "*way of farming that serves multiple functions*" ([44]; p. 186), bringing about multiple commodity (CO) and non-commodity outputs (NCO) [45].

As pointed out by Belletti et al. [46], the value of agricultural production is represented by the sum of both outputs, being NCO jointed to the production of CO.

Consequently, a multifunctional agricultural system is grounded on the contribution provided by agricultural processes marked by the provision of multiple, either economic, or social and environmental functions. The transition towards multifunctional agriculture is pushed by processes or a boundary shift, aiming at boosting both differentiation and diversification strategies at farm level [47].

From a territorial point of view, multifunctional agriculture is identified as the main facilitator of sustainable rural development, on account of higher production of both commodity and non-commodity outputs that a farm may provide in rural marginal areas ([48]; 16).

On the basis of previous considerations, the purpose of exploring immigrants' contribution to multifunctionality should emphasise the presence of immigrants within farms:

- a. with diversification and/or differentiation strategies;
- b. located in rural areas, above all in rural marginal areas, whose role in public goods provisioning is relatively higher.

However, if the objective is to investigate immigrant workers' effective contributions to multifunctional agriculture, the analysis of the contributions in multifunctional farms may not be sufficient. A generic or a day worker may provide the same contribution, regardless of the type of farms he or she is employed in. As a matter of fact, the provision of generic services cannot discriminate between immigrants' work on conventional and multifunctional farms. On the other hand, skilled immigrant workers are able to provide a stronger contribution to multifunctional farming. Therefore, a sound empirical analysis needs to be framed in the aforementioned idea of ethnicity as a skill [35,49], by discriminating the profile of immigrant workers and their qualifications in farming activity. To this

end, professional and management skills of (immigrant) farmers should be deepened [50]. Thus, further information needs to be collected concerning the qualification of immigrant workers involved in multifunctional farms.

Based on previous considerations, in our paper identification of in-migrants contribution to multifunctionality relies on the following dimensions:

- ✓ Types of farm where the immigrant worker is employed: by making reference to the classification adopted by Henke and Salvioni [51], the following farm typologies will be taken into account, with special emphasis on differentiated and diversified farm as farms with the highest degree of multifunctionality:
  - Micro farms, with a value of the saleable production less than 15,000 €;
  - Conventional farms, with a value of saleable production higher than 15,000 €, less than 30% of which is based on quality products;
  - Differentiated farms, with a higher percentage of saleable production represented by quality products. Organic farming and geographical indications are typical example of production realised in differentiated farms, where a strong contribution to multifunctionality emerges;
  - Diversified farms, which include more than 30% of activities realised in connection with farming (agritourism, bioenergy production, etc.); these activities are strongly rooted in rural contexts and, thus, provide a positive contribution to multifunctional agricultural systems;
  - Differentiated and diversified farms.
- ✓ Territorial localisation: in rural marginal areas the contribution of immigrants to multifunctional agriculture is higher, in account of the multiple function here fulfilled by agriculture (in terms of both CO and, above all, NCO). To this end, we will make reference to the distinction of rural areas developed by the Italian Ministry of agriculture in the National Strategic Plan, that distinguishes: urban poles, areas with intensive and specialised agriculture, intermediate rural areas, rural marginal areas. The hypothesis here is that the more rural the area of production is, the higher the contribution to multifunctionality provided by agriculture is.
- ✓ Job positions covered by immigrants: if, on the one hand, immigrant niches are usually identified with low qualified jobs [13], on the other hand, changing ethnic employment hierarchies have been analysed in recent literature [35], with the purpose of demonstrating upward patterns of skill acquisition. These processes are at stake also in the Italian farms. Consequently, skills acquisition may provide a contribution in building up multifunctional agricultural systems. The upgrading of skills is the intra-sectorial path towards upward mobility described by Kasimis and Papadopoulos [52], while the inter-sectorial trajectory is related to the mobility between different sectors [53]. In order to reveal intra-sectorial upward dynamics, we will make reference to the job position of immigrant workers, as detected in the Italian Farm Accountancy Data Network. A pyramid of the skills [54], pictured in Figure 1, will be taken as a reference. The hypothesis is that the more skilled the worker is, the higher his contribution to multifunctionality building. Assistant work, day work and common work does not permit to discriminate between conventional and multifunctional farms. On the other hand, upgrading of the skills and the acquisition of more skilled works let positive contributions to multifunctionality emerge. In the pyramid, the entrepreneurial roles have been deleted because they were not found in the database.



Figure 1. Pyramid of the skills. Source: Rudmann et al. [54]. Our processing.

#### 4. Methodology

As described in the previous part, the contribution of immigrant workers to multifunctional agriculture in rural areas has been explored, by taking into account the style of farming, rural area type and skills of the immigrant worker employed in the farm. Accordingly, immigrants' contributions have been specified through a three-step analysis. More precisely, three variables will be taken into account: the farm's typology or, as van der Ploeg et al. [47] put it, the style of farming, type of rural area and the qualification of immigrant workers employed in the farm (Figure 2).

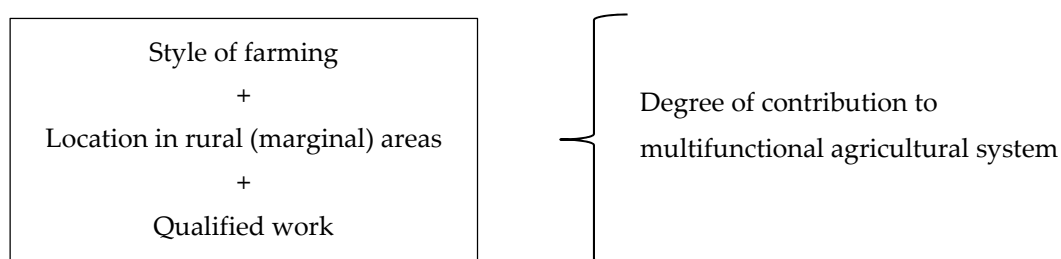


Figure 2. Key steps of empirical analysis.

A large contribution to multifunctionality building is provided in cases of diversified and differentiated farms, located in peripheral rural areas, where skilled immigrant workers are employed. To the best of our knowledge, few empirical analyses have tried to identify this contribution; therefore, we contribute to literature by analysing the Italian case.

Data have been collected from the Italian Farm Accountancy Data Network, which contains a set of information regarding the employees hired in the farms. The analysis has been carried out in the period 2013–2016, so including all farms present in the specified span of time. Redoubling has been neglected, by considering the farms present in the most recent year.

Following Figure 2, the contribution to multifunctionality is identified through the analysis of three indicators:

- a. Farm's typology. As far as style of farming is concerned, the profile of farms is drawn on Henke and Salvioni's [51] method, which makes reference to a set of indicators, like:

- Value of agricultural production, to distinguish micro farms (<15,000€) from conventional farms (>15,000€);
- Percentage of quality production (e.g., organic farming and typical products) on the total value of agricultural production. Differentiated farms emerge when this share is more than 30%;
- Incidence of diversified activities on the value of agricultural production. Diversified farms emerge when this share is higher than 30%.

The chosen indicator takes into account the distribution of immigrant employees in the farms classified according to the aforementioned Henke and Salvioni's [51] proposal, which provides the following farming styles:

- Conventional farms;
- Differentiated farms;
- Diversified farms;
- Differentiated and diversified farms.

Therefore, the percentage of either differentiated, and/or diversified, and differentiated and diversified farms are considered.

- b. Types of rural areas. Farming activity developed in marginal rural context has a significant impact on capacity building of multifunctionality (above all through the production of NCO). Area under observation has been classified by the Italian National Strategic Plan as: urban poles (A), area with intensive and specialised agriculture (B), intermediate rural areas (C) and rural areas with complex problem of development (D). In order to evaluate the presence of immigrants in rural areas a localisation coefficient has been calculated, according to the following formula:

$$\frac{n_{ij}/n_i}{n_j/n}$$

where:

$n_{ij}$  is the number of employees from the country  $i$  in the rural area  $j$ ;

$n_i$  is the number of farms with immigrant work from the country  $i$ .

$n_j$  is the number of farms localised in rural area  $j$ .

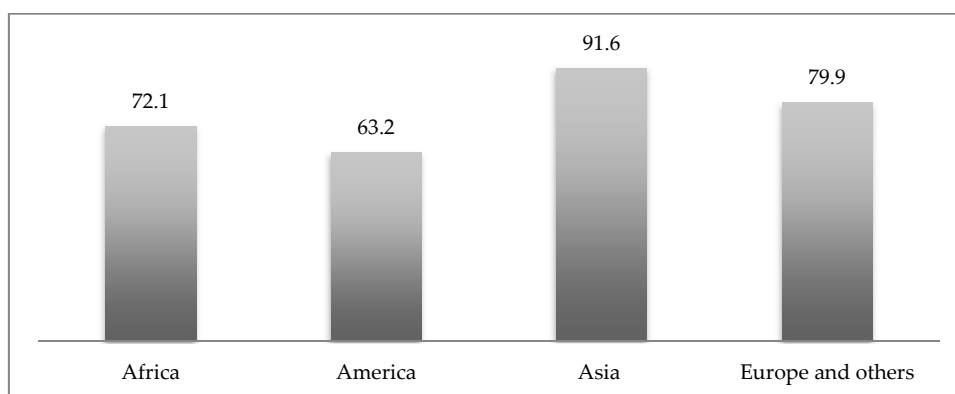
- c. Rate of immigrants' qualification. As far as qualification is concerned, we will refer to Figure 1, by analysing employees on the basis of their country of origin and professional skills. More precisely, the presence of qualified manpower is calculated as a percentage of the Italian's one. A relatively higher rate of qualification implies a higher involvement of immigrant workers in multifunctional farming. This is attributable to the value and the quality of the work provided, as classified by national law, which distinguishes the aforementioned levels of qualification, so providing higher hourly pay according to the level of qualification.

## 5. Results and Discussion

Previous indicators a, b, and c, have been processed starting from the FADN Italian database. In the section that follows, we try to describe each one of them.

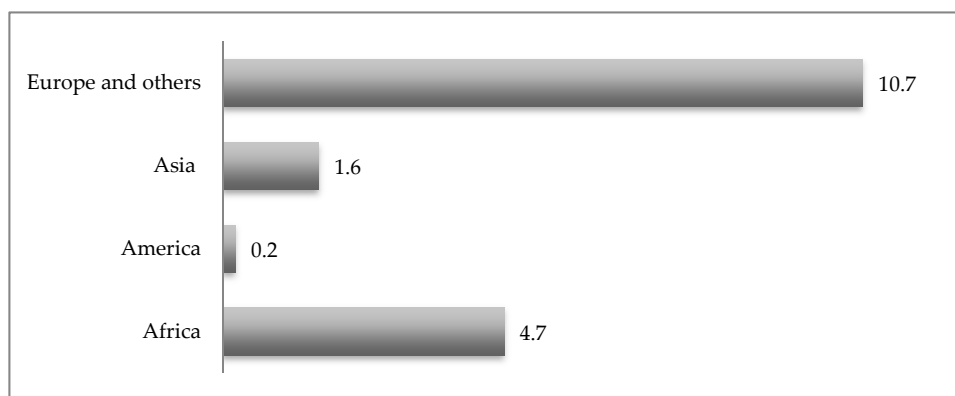
### a. Farm's profile

As far as farming style is concerned, immigrant workers are mainly employed within both small and big conventional farms. Figure 3 evidences the percentage of employees in conventional farming, which is more than 90% for Asian workers employed in (economic and physical) big farms, followed by European (80%), African (72.1%) and Latin American workers (63.2%).



**Figure 3.** Immigrants employed in both small and big conventional farms (%). Source: data processed from the FADN database.

To better indicate the contribution of immigrant workers to multifunctional agriculture, Figure 4 illustrates data regarding rate of employment in differentiated and/or diversified farms. The share of immigrants is calculated based on the total amount of Italian workers. A clear contribution from the European workers emerges, being the share higher than 10%, while African workers' incidence is less than 5%. The involvement of Asian workers related to the Italian rate is less than 2%, while the American contribution is negligible. This means European workers are involved in farms that are particularly active in building multifunctional agricultural systems, followed by the African workers. On the other side, Asian and, above all, American workers provide a relatively lower contribution in these farms (respectively, 0.2; 1.6). The following step analyses farms' localisation in rural context, under the hypothesis that the more rural the territory is, the higher its contribution to multifunctionality is.



**Figure 4.** Immigrants employed in differentiated and/or in diversified farms (% of Italian workers). Source: data processed from the FADN database.

#### b. Rural area

The calculated coefficient referred to the territorial rural context is evidenced in Table 1. Application of the coefficient of localisation provides interesting insights concerning immigrants' contribution to multifunctional agricultural systems. As a matter of fact, the presence of European workers is relatively higher in remote rural contexts, with a specialisation index that is more than double the Italian average. This means the presence of European workers is relatively higher in remote rural area and, according to the previous indicator, within both diversified and differentiated farms.

**Table 1.** Coefficient of localisation according to the rural area.

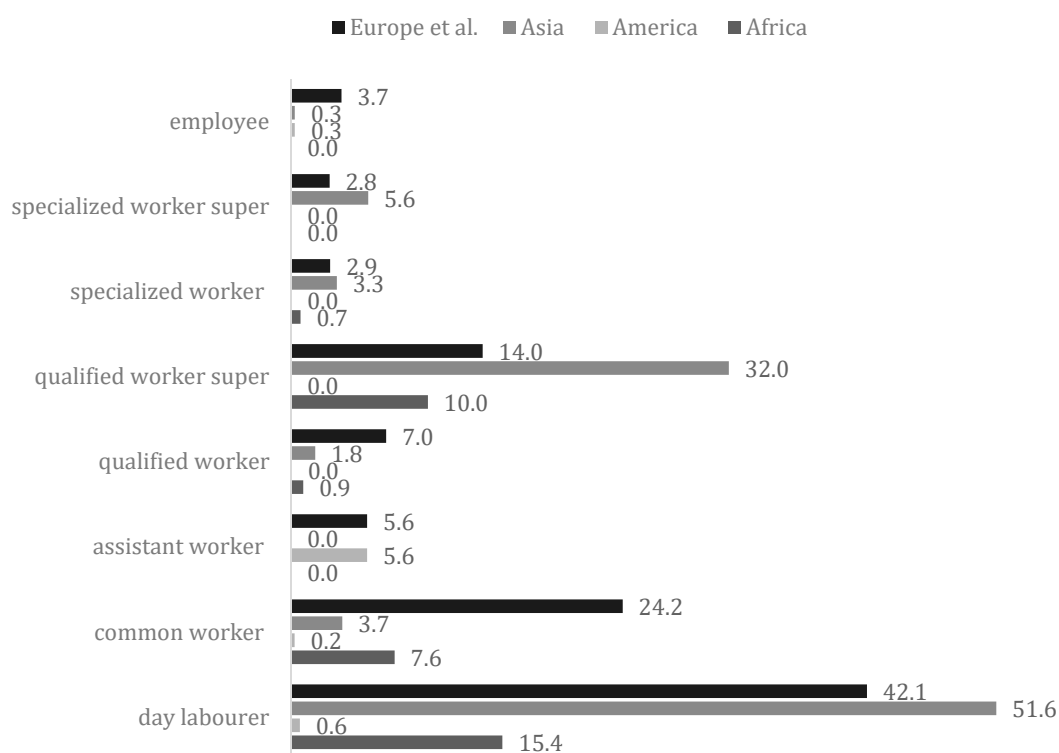
	<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>D</i>
Africa	0.5	1.7	0.5	0.7
America	1.6	0.2	1.3	1.6
Asia	0.2	1.2	1.5	0.2
Europe et al.	0.9	0.7	0.6	2.1

Source: data processed from the FADN database.

In area with intensive and specialised agriculture (B areas), the presence of African workers is relevant, while it is less evident in rural areas (both C and, above all, D). On the other side, Latin American workers are prevalingly localised in either urban areas (A) or rural areas with complex problems of development (D). Moreover, by taking into account both remote rural areas (D) and intermediate rural areas (C), the relevance of Latin American workers seems significant, in account of a good performance in both rural contexts. Finally, Asian workers are mainly active in intermediate rural areas (C) and in areas with intensive agriculture (B).

### c. Professional qualification

Working in multifunctional farms (first indicator), located in remote rural context (second indicator) may not be a sufficient proxy for measuring immigrants' contribution to multifunctionality building. People with different levels of professional skills provide different contributions along this path. Therefore, a third hypothesis to be tested here is that the contribution of the immigrants to the building of multifunctional agricultural systems may depend on the professional qualification of the immigrant workers. Thus, by making reference to the pyramid of the competencies (Figure 1), searching for skills upgrading, we have evaluated the share of immigrants with respect to the Italian workers employed in the same professional position. Results are illustrated in Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Share of immigrant workers according to the professional qualification (% of Italian workers). Source: data processed from the FADN database.



A typical phenomenon of work polarisation emerges for both Asian and European workers, indicated by the high percentage of work for both basic and qualified competencies. As a matter of fact, the rate of qualification of Asian workers reaches 55% for basic competencies and 33.8% for qualified work, 32% of which are intermediate level qualified (“super”). More than 9% of Asian immigrants are employed in the upper spheres of work, marked by the presence of highly skilled and specialised workers. Finally, only 0.3% are employees.

The European workforce, as a percentage of the Italian one, is greater than 72% in the basic competencies, while it is about 21% for intermediate levels of qualification (14% upper intermediate levels) and almost 6% for highly specialised workers. Moreover, a relatively significant share of European workers occupies the highest level of qualification in the pyramid of skills. As a matter of fact, a relevant share of employees is notable for European workers, while it is negligible for other ethnic groups (0.3% for American and Asian workers. 0 for the African ones).

Figure 5 evidences a reduced rate of qualification for African and American workers, which is more oriented towards basic competencies. African workers demonstrate a rate of qualification equal to 23% in the basic skills, and 10% for the qualified workers of an intermediate level (super).

In order to provide a synthetic overview of empirical analysis, Table 2 illustrates the results of each indicator used to identify immigrants’ contribution to multifunctional agricultural systems. As far as level of qualification is concerned, relatively higher profiles of skills have been taken into account, including: specialised workers, specialised workers “super” and employees.

**Table 2.** Indicators for each area of provenance.

	Farming Style	Type of Rural Area	Qualification
Africa	4.7	0.7	0.7
America	0.2	1.6	0.3
Asia	1.6	0.2	9.2
Europe et al.	10.7	2.1	9.4

From the table, it is possible to verify that Europe is a privileged area, which offers a relatively good contribution to multifunctional systems. As a matter of fact, the three indicators evidence good results, above all in terms of incidence of workers employed in differentiated and diversified farms (10.7). Moreover, the contribution given in these farms is provided by a relatively good percentage of qualified workers (9.4). Finally, localisation in prevalently remote rural (2.1) raises the degree of multifunctionality, above all in terms of contribution to NCO’s production. From the analysis of professional qualification, farming styles and geographical location of farms with immigrants, it is possible to determine that the European immigrant workers are more oriented/employed towards multifunctional activities, prevalently located in rural marginal areas, where the contribution towards multifunctional agriculture, through the production of non-commodity outputs is relatively higher [46]. This contribution increases, due to the higher professional skills provided by these workers, who in many cases act as middle managers, whose role has been emphasised in recent literature [49]. This contribution happens within processes of vertical ascendant mobility of the workers who have acquired competencies on the upper side of the pyramid of the skills. The Asian workers provide a good contribution to multifunctional agriculture too, above all in terms of their percentage of occupation in diversified and differentiated farms. A lower incidence is observed in terms of geographical localisation in rural marginal contexts.

As far as African workers are concerned, even though the share of participation in diversified and differentiated farms is relatively high (4.7), on the other side, their low concentration in rural marginal areas (0.7) and, above all, the lower qualification of workers does not permit us to determine their contribution with respect to conventional farms. Workers coming from Latin America are frequently employed in conventional farms, with a relatively low level of qualification. On the other side, they are

prevailingly located in remote rural areas (1.6), so they provide a good contribution in terms of NCO production.

## 6. Conclusions

According to Dufty-Jones [18] “the multifunctional countryside provides a useful economic frame for explaining the demographic trend of increasing numbers of immigrants living in rural places” (p.370). Our paper has to be considered as a first attempt of a broader and deeper analysis concerning the profile of immigrant work in Italian agriculture, with the purpose of appreciating their role in multifunctionality building. Limits of the paper refer to the static and descriptive analysis; thus, future research is needed to provide more robust and dynamic statistics. Another limit of the paper is the lack of data, above all in some areas of southern Italy. To confirm this, no entrepreneurial profiles have emerged, while the reality demonstrates the presence of immigrant entrepreneurs involved in the agricultural sector of Italy. Notwithstanding these limits, our available data let the role covered by immigrants work in multifunctional farms emerge to some extent. As a matter of fact, despite other analyses being applied to both Italian and international case studies, we have tried to investigate the presence of immigrants along paths of non-conventional farming [40,41] and our paper therefore may be considered a step forward in the literature. Our empirical analysis is grounded on three key variables: types of farms employing the immigrants (conventional-not conventional), rural areas where farms are located (rural marginal) and farmers’ skills.

As seen previously, a diversified picture of the situation emerges, which provides useful insights to estimate the contribution to multifunctional agriculture. A first element of analysis is that immigrants provide work prevailingly on conventional farms. However, some farms marked by processes of boundary shifts [47] have started employing immigrant workers, with different levels of professional and management skills. This permits us to identify different contributions to multifunctionality building. European and, to a lesser extent, Asian workers may be identified as good contributors to multifunctionality building, on account of their presence in non conventional farms, located in remote rural areas, with relatively high levels of qualification.

As said previously, these conclusions need to be validated with further research. However, preliminary results of the study demonstrate that an adequate policy action for immigrants may bring about positive effects on both individual and territorial level. As far as the individual base is concerned, policy action may boost a vertical process of qualification, which could stimulate the formation of entrepreneurial profiles, able to manage a multifunctional farm in the near future. This has been demonstrated in various studies [39–41,55]. As far as the territorial level is concerned, policy action may consolidate a multifunctional agriculture grounded on immigrant work, even in peripheral rural areas, with lesser risk of outmigration of the younger generations. This could improve the whole multifunctional role of immigrants in rural areas [17]. Finally, on account of their impact on rural development, the role of immigrants can also be nurtured by the provisioning of fixed social capital [56], and primarily through the provision of infrastructure [29]. This would avoid precarious rural cosmopolitanism [17] and provide a stronger contribution to building a modern rurality.

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