

Type of farming and female entrepreneurship in agriculture: The case of Trentino (Italy)

Formen der Produktion und Unternehmertum von Frauen in der Landwirtschaft im Trentino (Italien)

Claudia MARCHESONI and Giorgio DE ROS

Summary

This paper analyses female entrepreneurship in agriculture in the province of Trento (Italy). To carry out this analysis, both the available statistics and qualitative information gathered from in-depth interviews are examined. The quantitative data shows that the frequency of female entrepreneurs is higher in outlying districts where farming is less heavily mechanised and agricultural land is more extensively utilised. Qualitative information allows us to focus more clearly on the constraints that women face to become - and to be recognised as - entrepreneurs, particularly where agriculture is capital intensive. In spite of this situation, specific business strategies have been developed by female farmers.

Keywords: farming, entrepreneurship, gender roles

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit Formen der Produktion und dem Unternehmertum von Frauen in der Landwirtschaft in der Provinz von Trento. Für diesen Beitrag wurden sowohl statistische als auch qualitative Daten von Tiefeninterviews analysiert. Die quantitativen Daten zeigen, dass die Zahl von weiblichen Unternehmerinnen in Randgebieten höher ist, wo die Landwirtschaft weniger mechanisiert und das Land nicht so intensiv bewirtschaftet wird. Die qualitativen Daten zeigen auf, welche Anstrengungen Frauen machen müssen, um Unternehmerinnen zu werden - und als solche anerkannt zu werden,

Published 2009 in the *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Agrarökonomie*, Vol. 18(2): 105-117. Available on-line: <http://oega.boku.ac.at>

insbesondere in Gebieten mit intensiver landwirtschaftlicher Nutzung. Trotz dieser Umstände haben weibliche Unternehmerinnen eigene Wege und Strategien entwickelt, um ihre Vorstellungen landwirtschaftlicher Produktion umzusetzen.

Schlagerworte: Landwirtschaft, Unternehmertum, Geschlechterrollen

1. Introduction

Most of the scientific literature dealing with women in farming may be placed under the heading “discourse of the family farm”, and is motivated by the concern with providing causal and structural explanations for the state of women in agriculture (BRANDTH, 2002). Attention is focused in particular on the key role of land ownership which, due to inheritance mechanisms governed by a patriarchal culture, is transmitted almost exclusively from father to son. It has been seen that these mechanisms have led to a division based on gender inequality with respect to the power of decision-making within the farm, as well as in working practices and the opportunities for agricultural education (SHORTALL, 1999). Given this state of affairs, women in agriculture are, even more than in other economic sectors usually excluded from entrepreneurship (PESCAROLO, 1996; YANAGISAKO, 2002; BASSOLI and CALDARO, 2003; GÁLVEZ MUNÓZ, 2006). Given that their entrance into agriculture, that is, to the family farm, comes about through marriage, they are frequently identified as “farm wives”, invisible workers who provide an unexpectedly high contribution to the family business (GASSON, 1992).

A question that has received less attention is, if and how the different gender roles have changed over time (SILVASTI, 2003), in particular in the context of a rural culture, where agricultural practices continue to have a decidedly masculine connotation. Alongside the more extensively investigated “farm wives”, we are currently witnessing the emergence of a new group of farm women: women farmers who enter the agricultural sector by professional choice (HAUGEN, 1990). Their business objectives are often different from those hypothesised by classic economic theory (BOCK, 2004; PEDERSEN and KJÆRÅRD, 2004).

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the phenomenon of female entrepreneurship in the Trentino. More precisely, we wish to investigate, supported by quantitative and qualitative data, the constraints

which women encounter when they try to set up a farm and the experiences they may make in its development. With this in mind, special attention will be paid to the relationship between the intensity of mechanisation in agricultural practices and the presence of women, which some previous studies have shown to be a crucial aspect of the situation (ALMÁS and HAUGEN, 1991; SHORTALL, 1999; SAUGERES, 2002; BRANDTH, 2006).

2. Study area, methods and data collection

The province of Trento, or Trentino as it is commonly known, is located in the north-east of Italy. Due to the alpine topography, only 9.4% of the total area of the province is permanently used for agriculture, while mountain pastures utilised for summer grazing of livestock cover another 13.2% of the total area. Most farms specialise in viticulture or apple growing, while dairy farming, the third agricultural activity in terms of gross product, is mainly confined to the mountain areas.

To quantify the presence of women farmers we used data from the Provincial Register of Agricultural Enterprises (APIA, 2006). The Register is maintained by the Provincial Administration for administrative purposes. It is necessary to be listed in it to be officially recognised as a farmer, i.e. to be entitled to apply for most of the direct payments awarded within the Rural Development Plan. There are two sections: the first covers those for whom farming is their main activity, in terms of working hours and income. The second is for those who spend at least 300 hours per year working on their farms. Full time farmers, listed in the first section of the Register, usually have priority when applying for subsidies for agricultural competitiveness. Every application for admission or change of section is subject to mandatory approval by the district's Territorial Committee for Rural Development, a body composed of nine members, six of whom represent farmers' unions, agricultural co-operatives and landowners.

The Provincial Administration publishes annually, for each section of the APIA, aggregate data by district, farm type and farmer's gender. It is therefore possible to calculate the percentage of female agricultural entrepreneurs in each district from these data, both full-time and part-time, out of the total number of farm managers. The same can be done

with data about the farm's type of production (specialist vineyards, specialist fruit, vineyards and fruit combined, specialist livestock, mixed crops-livestock, other). On the other hand, apart from some information on land use, APIA provides very little information on farm structures and no data is collected on mechanisation.

To formulate an indicator of the level of mechanisation we used data from the last Agricultural Census. The Agricultural Census collects data on the number of tractors in different power classes and the number of units included in the category "walking tractors, motor hoes and motor mowers". Walking tractors represent low-grade technology, adapted to small or steep land parcels and not requiring expensive investment, while tractors are the conventional form of mechanisation. We obtained an indicator, albeit rather rough, of the intensity of mechanisation in each district by dividing the total number of tractors by the number of walking tractors, hoes and mowers. Higher values signal a relatively higher number of tractors, hence more sophisticated machinery and a more capital-intensive type of farming.

To look more closely at the constraints faced by female entrepreneurs in developing their businesses, qualitative data were collected through in-depth, biographical interviews. Our sources were three female farmers, three female associates in family-run businesses and one director of a local farmers' union (Table 1).

Table 1. List of interviewees

Code	Role	District	Age	Production
F1	Entrepreneur	Vallagarina	39	Berries (organic)
F2	Entrepreneur	Vallagarina	42	Vegetables (organic)
F3	Entrepreneur	Adige Valley	38	Berries (with processing)
F4	Family Associate	Adige Valley	45	Viticulture
F5	Family Associate	Upper Valsugana	51	Apples
F6	Family Associate	Giudicarie	53	Maize and field crops
D1	Director of Farmers' Union	All	48	

The main issues addressed in the interviews were:

- Economic situation: motivation and reasons for interviewees becoming involved in or, on the contrary, abandoning farming, in relationship to income;

- Legal position: issues regarding the formal and fiscal conditions of women in family-run businesses, in particular inheritance and acquisition of the business;
- Socio-cultural situation: position in the family firm, conventional and alternative farm types and factors leading to or hampering their success.

During the interviews, the interviewees were asked about the position of women in modern agriculture and their skills in this sector.

The first farmers to be interviewed were contacted through the Association of Women Farmers, which is federated to the local farmers' union, and we then proceeded with a "cluster" method. Further conversations were held with other male and female farmers.

3. Results

3.1 Location of farms managed by women

The Provincial Agricultural Enterprise Register recorded 1,244 women farmers at the end of 2006, 13.8% of the total number of farmers. Counting only full-time farmers the percentage of women decreases to 12.5%. This means that the presence of women is relatively higher among part-time farmers.

The percentages of women farmers, farms specialised in the two most profitable areas of production - viticulture and apple growing - and the degree of mechanisation are compared for each district (Tab. 2). The data shows that the frequency of female entrepreneurs is not equally distributed over the province's districts. The areas with a higher rate of mechanisation (Vallagarina, Adige Valley, Non Valley) are those with higher levels of specialisation in viticulture and apple growing. In fact, the main agricultural activity in Vallagarina is viticulture, while in the Adige Valley vineyards are often combined with orchards on the same farm. In the Non Valley apple growing is predominant. These are also the three districts with lower percentages of full time female entrepreneurs.

On the other hand, we find a higher percentage of women as full-time farmers in the less mechanised areas (Primiero 37.7%; Fiemme Valley 36.5%; Lower Valsugana 28.3%). In these districts agriculture is oriented more towards livestock and less specialised types of farming.

Table 2. Comparison of the percentages of full-time female entrepreneurs (Fft), all female entrepreneurs (F) in agriculture, farms specialised in permanent crops (PC), and the farm tractors/walking tractors, motor hoes and motor mowers ratio (Tt).

District	%Fft*	%F*	%PC*	Tt**
Fiemme Valley (Cavalese)	36.5	22.4	0.0	1.02
Primiero (Fiera di Primiero)	37.7	33.0	0.0	0.57
Lower Valsugana - Tesino (Borgo V.)	28.3	27.0	26.1	0.75
Upper Valsugana (Pergine V.)	25.1	23.1	49.3	1.04
Adige Valley (Trento)	10.5	12.5	88.3	1.80
Non Valley (Cles)	4.8	9.8	89.4	1.82
Sole Valley (Malè)	26.4	29.8	38.5	1.04
Giudicarie (Tione)	20.6	22.4	17.2	1.10
Upper Garda (Riva del Garda)	5.6	6.8	34.2	1.06
Vallagarina (Rovereto)	9.6	7.7	74.9	1.60
Fassa Valley (Vigo di Fassa)	19.6	15.8	0.0	0.80
Trentino	12.5	13.8	71.2	1.44

* Source: APIA at 31.12.2006.

** Source: AGRICULTURAL CENSUS 2000.

The data shows a negative correlation between the percentage of female entrepreneurs and the degree of mechanisation in the different districts (-0.705 when all agricultural entrepreneurs are taken into account; -0.752 for full time entrepreneurs). There is also a negative correlation as between the percentage of female entrepreneurs and the specialisation in permanent crops (-0.588 for total entrepreneurs; -0.737 for full time ones). Thus, while the correlation with the percentages of all women listed in APIA is stronger for the degree of mechanisation than the specialisation in permanent, and more profitable, crops, if we consider just the full time farmers the values are similar.

The Upper Garda district, where the rate of women farmers is particularly low even though the degree of mechanisation is lower than average, is an exception. This could be explained by the particular impact that summer tourism has on the female labour market. Generally speaking, the most evident lack of female farmers occurs in those areas characterised by higher degree of mechanisation and single-crop more profitable cultivations, such as vineyards and orchards (Fig. 1). This indicates that women tend to be excluded from farm management where agriculture is more mechanised and lucrative.

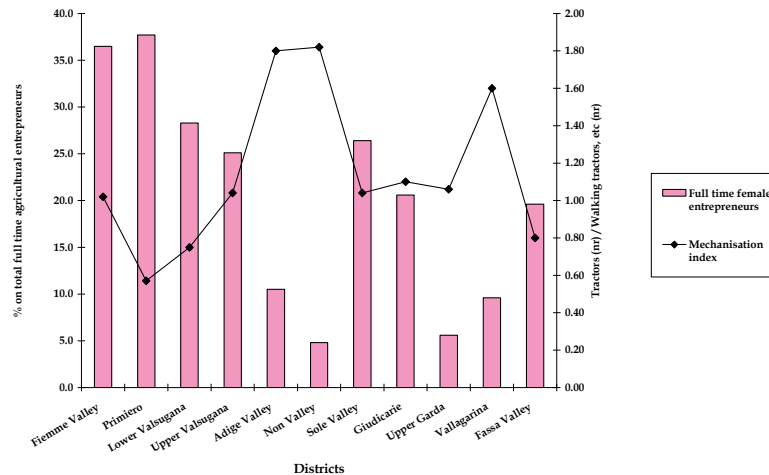


Fig. 1 Percentages of full time women farmers and tractors/walking tractors, motor hoes and motor mowers ratios according to district

Source: APIA at 31.12.2006, AGRICULTURAL CENSUS 2000.

3.2 The position of women in the agricultural sector

The biographies and stories recounted by the women interviewed have provided important data for consideration of their professional progress within the agricultural world. Above all, it is important to underline that all female entrepreneurs interviewed were involved in non-intensive agriculture. In two cases (F1; F3) the husbands, after the initial period, decided to give up their previous jobs and work together with their wives, thus overturning the traditional roles. Regarding the transfer of family land, one woman (F1) declared that she was forced to give up her inheritance, and bought the land later on. Two of the family associates (F4; F5) entered farming through marriage, while a third was raised in a farming family.

Economic situation: In the case of the family associates, the women (F4; F5) testified to their “marginal” role in the farm management, considered just an auxiliary worker (F5). Decisions are mainly taken by the husband, even when they concern important investments. However, the women declare themselves satisfied with their position, and appear even more enthusiastic than their husbands (F6). For

female entrepreneurs, one of the most important aspects of their economic situation is access to credit (F1, F2). A farmer explains her difficulties in getting credit for investment in her business: "The bank did not trust me and my project and wanted my husband's signature. But if I want to take a risk, I'll do so myself" (F2). Two of them, in particular, needed the support of their husbands to get involved in farming. The third (F3) stressed the issue of acquisition of land, usually managed by men, not by women.

Legal position: Family associates, often women, are not legally employees, but rather "assistants" in the business. The farm does not have to pay a salary to family labourer nor pay their social security contributions (even though the latter are, in fact, paid in almost all cases). The issue was discussed with the director of the local farmers' union and his co-worker. He stated that the social legitimisation of the traditional family farms is decreasing. The solution proposed is the constitution of societies of family members, with everyone having the same rights (D). The family farm model is influenced by the inheritance system, where males are often preferred to females for the continuity of the business. As one woman said: "I was expecting to own a part of the land, but it has never happened" (F1).

Socio-cultural position: The women interviewed, both entrepreneurs and family associates, pointed out that the use of technology was one of the main factors hampering recognition of their socio-cultural role. One of them also declared having difficulties in machinery management and expected the husband to solve this kind of problem (F1), while another said she would work with machines "only if it is strictly necessary" (F6). As the director of a local farmers' union told us: "in every district, we have a board which decides whether to allocate full-time or part-time status. Now, if a woman declares that she is involved in fruit growing as a full-time farmer, they normally don't believe her, because they think that 'women can't drive tractors' and aren't real farmers. In this sense, women are considered inadequate for certain work, above all when it concerns mechanical technologies". (D1). This division of tasks often goes back to childhood, where women cite a lack of training in matters of machinery.

It appears from the issues that emerged during the interviews, that some innovative productions have gained considerable importance in Trentino over time, offering women more opportunities for getting

involved in agriculture. An example of this situation can be found in the production of berries, which today are intensively cultivated. Berry cultivation began in the late seventies and with time gained importance, especially during the nineties. It requires minimal investment in terms of mechanisation and relatively small plots of land.

In the first decade, production was mainly carried out by part-time workers who used abandoned fields on steep slopes. Women had an important role in this process and in increasing production. In the beginning, returns were low and uncertain, the women working for a secondary income. Even though cultivation methods are currently structured and intensive, production remains for the most part labour-intensive. Today, female members of the Sant'Orsola co-operative, the main co-operative for berry production, account for 34.3% of the total. As can be seen on their website (www.santorsola.it), farms run by women predominate amongst those which offer external visits, in line with the co-operative's aim of reinforcing marketing and image and encouraging integrated activities.

4. Discussion

The results of our study suggest that the development of female entrepreneurship is somewhat linked with the type of farming carried out in an area. In this framework the level of mechanisation in agricultural practices is a critical and complex factor. Indeed, the comparison between the APIA and the Census data seems to indicate that where there are many tractors, there are relatively few female entrepreneurs and vice versa. The testimonies gathered in Trentino generally confirm the gender division when the use of technology is involved (TABET, 1979; SCHMIDT and BUOYARDANE, 1997; ABRAHAMSSON and JOHANSSON, 2006). Also, the symbolic and ideological power of the agricultural machine operator creates and maintains the essentially masculine image of agriculture (SAUGERES, 2002). The symbolic power can lead to internal conflicts with the women's feminine self-identity, if they learn to operate machines; even though it can bring the respect of (male) farmers (BRANDTH, 2006).

The role of machines a complex factor because it tends to be interwoven with other factors in intricate relationships of cause and effect. It is very difficult, for example, to isolate the increase in mechanisation

in agriculture, and its masculinisation, from the market value of the resulting production. Where the market value is greater, women tend to be excluded from full-time agricultural entrepreneurship. This is highlighted by the situation in those districts of Trentino where farms specialise in the cultivation of apples and grapevines at high surplus value. Variation is geographical rather than temporal, but there are similarities with the situation examined in Norway by ALMÅS and HAUGEN (1991) regarding the milking of cows. This was an essentially female activity, but was transformed into a male activity over two phases: the first, when milk has become a commodity and is no longer produced for the farming family's subsistence, the second, with the introduction of the milking machine.

The strong presence of women farmers in the outlying districts of Trentino where agriculture is in general less productive, is reminiscent of the 1950s. Then, women managed to take over farms from men because agriculture was no longer a profitable activity. Men worked in the industrial sector and women assumed the task of taking care of the land and livestock. In this context, the "feminisation of agriculture" seems to be a result of the abandonment of farming by men (PESCAROLO, 1996; BARBERIS, 1999).

The issue of mechanisation is, however, also linked to another issue: mechanisms of transfer of ownership of agricultural lands. The importance of the inheritance system in societies that place a high value on property has been demonstrated by GOODY (1973). Even in the Alps, the traditional cultural pattern favoured those children who had to maintain a new family group, i.e. married sons (COLE and WOLF, 1974). This tendency continues, as testified by our interviewees. But, where there is less pressure from economic interests, and investments for land cultivation are lower, the space for women in farming is likely greater.

Despite the constraints they face, women's interest and engagement in agriculture has increased, particularly in niche sectors such as organic farming and on-farm diversification. Among the people interviewed it was acknowledged that women are particularly open to identify new strategies and in many cases they were able to support themselves by means of short production chains and alternative marketing systems such as Collective Purchasing Schemes (BOCK, 2004; ECCHER, 2007;

OEDL-WIESER, 2007). Farms of this type are also an important target of EU policy for the development of rural areas (SARACENO, 2005).

To escape the constraints, numerous women have started from scratch and, by buying small plots of land, have become operators of small farm. The case of berry cultivation in Trentino shows how a marginal activity may acquire economic importance. Similar outcomes of small-scale households were documented in a study carried out in Devon (BOUQUET, 1985). This case shows how a marginal activity may acquire importance over time and raise the economic and social status of those engaged in it.

5. Conclusions

Even though the number of farms run by women is on the rise, for the time being only one in eight in Trentino is managed by a woman. The picture that emerges from the data presented here is of women in a disadvantaged position in standard, highly mechanised and capital-intensive agriculture.

Nevertheless, our results suggest that in Trentino women farmers – excluded from the most lucrative types of agriculture – are taking the opportunities offered by new activities, such as alternative production, diversified activities and different forms of direct selling. These are sectors with considerable potential. To assess how these opportunities will be exploited requires longitudinal studies, which would surely benefit from comparative examination of the different situations throughout Europe.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editors for their helpful comments on a first version of this paper.

References

- ABRAHAMSSON, L. and JOHANSSON, J. (2006): From grounded skills to sky qualifications: A study of workers creating and recreating qualifications, identity and gender at an underground iron ore mine in Sweden. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 48, 5, pp. 657-676.
- ALMÁS, R. and HAUGEN, M. S. (1991): Norwegian gender roles in transition. The masculinisation hypothesis in the past and in the future. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 7, pp. 79-83.

- BARBERIS, C. (1999): *Le campagne italiane dall'Ottocento ad oggi* [The Italian countryside from the Eighteenth Century to today]. Rome: Laterza.
- BASSOLI, M., CALDARO, M. (2003): *Essere imprenditrici. Fenomenologia di storie femminili d'impresa* [Being an entrepreneur. Phenomenology of female business stories]. Milan: Franco Angeli.
- BOCK, B. B. (2004): Fitting in and multi-tasking: Dutch farm women's strategies in rural entrepreneurship. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 44, 3, pp. 245-260.
- BOUQUET, M. (1995): *Family, servants and visitors: The farm household in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Devon*. Norwich: Geobooks.
- BRANDTH, B. (2002): Gender identity in European family farming: a literature review. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 42, 3, pp. 181 - 200.
- BRANDTH, B. (2006): Agricultural body-building: Incorporation of gender, body and work. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 22, pp. 17-27.
- COLE, J. and WOLF, E. (1974): *The Hidden Frontier*. Berkeley: Berkley University Press.
- ECCHER, F. (2007): Women entrepreneurs and employees in agriculture as a resource for rural development. In: MARCHESONI, C., GREITER, A. (Eds): *L'altro motore dell'economia. Il ruolo femminile nei percorsi di sviluppo in contesto alpino* [The other driving force of the economy. The role of women in development programmes across the alpine region]. Report N. 40 of the Centro di Ecologia Alpina, Trento. pp. 83-90.
- GÁLVEZ MUNÓZ, L. (2006): Challenging a gender-neutral business history. *Imprese e Storia*, 34, pp. 269-293.
- GASSON, R. (1992): Farmers' wives - Their contribution to the farm business. *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 43 (1), pp. 74-87.
- GOODY, J. (1973): Strategies of heirship. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1, pp. 3-20.
- HAUGEN, M. S. (1990): Female farmers in Norwegian agriculture. From traditional farm women to professional farmers. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 30, 2, pp. 197-209.
- OEDL-WIESER, T. (2007): Female Entrepreneurship in the alpine region of Pinzau-Pongau (Austria). In: MARCHESONI, C., GREITER, A. (Eds): *L'altro motore dell'economia. Il ruolo femminile nei percorsi di sviluppo in contesto alpino*. [The other driving force of the economy. The role of women in development programmes across the alpine region]. Report N. 40 of the Centro di Ecologia Alpina, Trento. pp. 45-64.
- PEDERSEN, K.B. and KJÆRÅRD, B. (2004): Do we have room for shining eyes and cows as comrades? Gender perspectives on organic farming in Denmark. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 44, 4, pp. 373-394.
- PESCAROLO, A. (1996): Il lavoro e le risorse delle donne in età contemporanea [Women's work and resources in the contemporary age]. In: GROPPI, A. (Ed): *Il lavoro delle donne* [Women's work]. Rome: Laterza. pp. 299-344.
- SARACENO, E. (2005): Rural development policies and the Second Pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy: The way ahead. In: ORTNER, K.M. (Ed.): *Assessing*

- rural development policies of the Common Agricultural Policy. Kiel: Wissenschaftsverlag Vauk, pp. 25-47.
- SAUGERES, L. (2002): Of tractors and men: masculinity, technology and power in a French farming community. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 42, 2, pp. 143-159.
- SCHMIDT, H. and BUOYARDANE, N. (1997): Also ich denk' mir, dass es eine Frau wirklich verdammt schwer haben wird, sich hier zu entwickeln. In: MOSER, J. (Hrsg): *Eisenerz: eine Bergbaugemeinde im Wandel*. Frankfurt am Main: Institut für Kulturanthropologie und Europäische Ethnologie der Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe-Universität. pp. 73-136.
- SHORTALL, S. (1999): *Women and Farming: Property and Power*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- SILVASTI, T. (2003): Bending borders of gendered labour division on farms: The case of Finland. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 43, 2, pp. 154-166.
- TABET, P. (1979): Les mains, les outils, les armes. *L'Homme - Revue française d'anthropologie*, 19, 3-4, pp. 5-61.
- YANAGISAKO, S. (2002): *Producing Culture and Capital. Family Firms in Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Affiliation

Claudia Marchesoni
Fondazione Edmund Mach – Istituto Agrario di S.Michele
Agricultural Resources Department
Via E.Mach 1 – 38010 San Michele all'Adige, Italy
Tel.: +39 0461 615321
eMail: claudia.marchesoni@iasma.it

Giorgio De Ros
Fondazione Edmund Mach – Istituto Agrario di S.Michele
Agricultural Resources Department
Via E.Mach 1 – 38010 San Michele all'Adige, Italy
Tel.: +39 0461 615321
eMail: giorgio.deros@iasma.it

