

The Ethics of Care, One Health, and the Environment: A Systemic Approach for Integrated Territorial Health. The Case of olive groves and vineyards.

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Abstract

The One Health paradigm promotes an integrated and interdisciplinary vision of health, recognizing the close interconnectedness between human, animal, and environmental health. In light of global challenges related to climate change, biodiversity loss, and the emergence of new diseases, it becomes essential to adopt a systemic approach capable of addressing the complexity of human-environment relationships. This contribution analyzes the theoretical foundations of the One Health approach, explores the cultural and symbolic dimensions of the territory, and proposes the wellness economy as an operational model for sustainable development, using the emblematic case of the Italian olive oil and wine supply chains.

Introduction

In recent decades, the increasing complexity of health and environmental challenges has highlighted the inadequacy of sectoral approaches in understanding and addressing the interactions between human, animal, and environmental health. The contemporary era, marked by global phenomena such as climate change, biodiversity loss, uncontrolled urbanization, and the emergence of new zoonoses, requires a radical rethinking of scientific paradigms and health policies. In this context, the One Health paradigm, promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO), FAO, OIE, and UNEP, has emerged as an integrated and unifying approach aimed at sustainably optimizing the health of people, animals, and ecosystems (White & Hughes, 2019). The concept of One Health is based on the recognition of the interdependence between biological and social systems and proposes an epistemological and operational framework that overcomes disciplinary fragmentation. This approach has proven particularly effective in managing emerging infectious diseases, many of which are zoonotic in origin, as demonstrated by recent global health crises: according to the WHO, over 60% of human infectious diseases originate in animals, and approximately 75% of emerging diseases are zoonotic in nature (Ministero della Salute, 2020-2025).

The One Health approach is not limited to the clinical-health dimension but extends to environmental governance, food safety, the prevention of antimicrobial resistance, and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles. In Italy, the National Prevention Plan 2020–2025 and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) have formally recognized the strategic importance of this paradigm, promoting integrated actions across the health, environment, and agriculture sectors (A. Pannella, 2024).

Recent scientific contributions emphasize the need for transdisciplinary training for health professionals, as highlighted by the Global Curriculum One Health presented in 2025, which aims to bridge educational gaps and promote a culture of systemic and interconnected health, offering a critical and multidimensional reflection on the cultural, ecological, and ethical implications of this approach (I. D’Aria, 2025; Lingiardi and Saggio, 2025).

In summary, One Health today represents not only a scientific strategy but also an ethical and political necessity to address the health challenges of the 21st century in an equitable, sustainable, and resilient way.

The Environment as an Integrated System

The One Health approach calls for redefining how health, environment, and society are connected, moving beyond fragmented perspectives. In this framework, the environment can no longer be considered a mere backdrop to health dynamics, but rather a structural and co-constitutive actor in the processes of health and disease. It is therefore necessary to delve deeper into the relational nature of the environment, understood not as a static or neutral entity, but as an integrated system in which physical, biological, and anthropogenic components intertwine. Understanding this complexity is an essential step to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies and to promote a scientific culture based on the awareness of the interdependence between nature and culture. In contemporary scientific debate, the environment can no longer be conceived as a simple natural framework, static and separate from human activities, but rather as a complex and dynamic system, consisting of a network of interdependent relationships between physical, biological, and anthropogenic factors. This systemic vision is based on the assumption that every environmental component – from the atmosphere to soils, from ecosystems to human infrastructures – interacts non-linearly with others, generating emergent effects that cannot be understood through a sectoral or reductionist analysis (M. E. Conti, 2016). The environment, from this perspective, is configured as a socio-ecological construction, resulting from the intertwining of natural heritage and human intervention. Landscape transformations, urbanization, intensive agriculture, industrialization, and climate change are just some of the manifestations of this interaction, which develops in a continuous process of co-evolution between nature and culture. As emphasized by the European Landscape Convention (Florence, 2000), the landscape itself is “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors” (sspr, 2024). This integrated conception of the environment implies an epistemological and methodological shift: it is no longer sufficient to analyse individual environmental elements in isolation, but it is necessary to adopt interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, capable of grasping the interconnections between ecological, economic, social, and cultural systems. In this sense, the environment presents itself as an open, self-regulating, and dynamically balanced system, subject to feedback, critical thresholds, and non-linearity phenomena (M.E. Conti, 2016). The ecology of complex systems, ecological economics, critical geography, and the social sciences of the environment converge in recognizing that environmental dynamics cannot be understood or governed without considering the historical, political, and cultural dimensions that traverse them. The environment, therefore, is not an objective and neutral given, but a co-constructed reality that reflects the choices, values, and priorities of human societies over time. Furthermore, the interpretation of the environment as an integrated system has important implications for governance and territorial planning. It requires regulatory and decision-making tools capable of integrating scientific knowledge and local expertise, promoting forms of democratic participation and shared responsibility in the management of natural resources. In this framework, sustainability cannot be understood as a simple reduction of environmental impact but as the ability to regenerate socio-ecological systems, ensuring intergenerational equity and resilience to future shocks. Recognizing the environment as an integrated system means, therefore, abandoning dichotomous visions between nature and culture, between human and non-human, to embrace a relational and processual

perspective. Only through such a paradigm will it be possible to effectively address the environmental challenges of our time, from the climate crisis to biodiversity loss, from environmental justice to ecological transition.

The Territory as a Socio-Ecological Construct

As discussed in previous sections, the One Health approach necessitates a profound revision of the interpretive and operational models we use to address the health and environmental challenges of our time. From this perspective, the environment is no longer merely a backdrop to socio-health dynamics, but a co-constitutive actor in the processes of health and disease. Consequently, the concept of territory must also be re-read in light of this systemic and interconnected vision, which recognizes the inseparable intertwining of ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. It is within this framework that territorial planning assumes a strategic role, becoming not only a technical-administrative tool but a fundamental lever for promoting public health and sustainability.

Every territory is the result of a historical stratification of relationships between nature and culture, between ecological processes and social practices. It cannot be reduced to a mere geographical or administrative entity but must be understood as a complex and dynamic system, in which biotic and abiotic elements, material and immaterial infrastructures, collective memories, and future projections intertwine. As highlighted in the ISTAT Territory Report 2020, the environmental, economic, and social characteristics of Italian territories are deeply interconnected and decisively influence the quality of life of populations (Istat, 2020).

From this perspective, the territory is configured as a "common good" to be protected and valued, not only for its productive or settlement function but for its role in generating health, well-being, and social cohesion. Territorial planning, therefore, cannot limit itself to regulating land use or managing urban transformations, but must address the complexity of socio-ecological systems, promoting development models capable of regenerating ecosystems, strengthening social networks, and enhancing cultural heritage. The integration of One Health principles into territorial planning represents a challenge and at the same time an opportunity to rethink public policies in a preventive and intersectoral way. As emphasized in the National Prevention Plan 2020–2025, health is the result of a complex interaction between environmental, social, economic, and cultural factors, and requires coordinated interventions across different levels of governance and disciplinary areas (Ministero della Salute, 2020 – 2025). In this sense, territorial planning can become a tool for health promotion if it is oriented towards reducing environmental and social inequalities, preventing health risks related to pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss, and enhancing local resources. The adoption of environmental health indicators, the mapping of social determinants of health, the promotion of sustainable mobility and ecological agriculture, the protection of cultural landscapes, and participatory urban regeneration are just some of the actions that can be integrated into planning processes to make them consistent with the One Health approach (Ministero Salute, 2024).

The implementation of territorial planning inspired by the One Health paradigm requires a cultural and institutional change. It is necessary to overcome the fragmentation of competencies and promote forms of collaborative governance, actively involving local authorities, health institutions, the scientific community, citizens, and economic actors. Recent experiences, such as those promoted in Umbria and Puglia, demonstrate how the construction of intersectoral networks and the definition of integrated plans can significantly contribute to disease prevention, well-being promotion, and territorial resilience. In conclusion, recognizing the territory as a product of multiple interactions and adopting planning inspired by One Health principles means placing health at the center of

development policies, from a perspective of environmental justice, social equity, and long-term sustainability. Only through an integrated and participatory approach will it be possible to build healthier, more inclusive, and resilient territories, capable of facing the challenges of the present and the future. Goal 11 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda aims to “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable,” placing the need to rethink the relationship between urban development, quality of life, and sustainability at the center of public action. This objective implies a redefinition of the very concept of sustainability, which can no longer be understood exclusively as the preservation of the existing but must be conceived as a dynamic and proactive perspective, oriented towards the enhancement of territories and the qualitative improvement of living conditions. In this context, municipal administrations assume a strategic role, as they are the institutions closest to citizens and therefore most able to identify their needs, aspirations, and potential. However, significant delays persist, especially in small and medium-sized municipalities, linked to structural deficiencies, lack of strategic vision, and weak planning capacity. To overcome these criticalities, it is necessary to promote an integrated approach that combines ethics, politics, and economics, through inclusive and participatory decision-making processes capable of involving not only citizens and local associations but also other public and private stakeholders. From this perspective, sustainability becomes a guiding principle for territorial governance, to be implemented through ordinary programming tools – such as urban planning – integrated with local development strategies oriented towards resilience, innovation, and social cohesion.

One Health and Sustainable Tourism

A particularly relevant area where the need for this approach is evident is tourism, recognized by the World Code of Ethics for Tourism as a factor of sustainable development. The Lanzarote Charter, in particular, emphasizes that tourism must be ecologically sustainable in the long term, economically viable, and ethically and socially equitable towards local communities. This implies the need to integrate tourism with the natural, cultural, and human environment, carefully assessing its impacts on cultural heritage and the traditional dynamics of host communities.

The challenge, therefore, is to build a systemic vision in which tourism is not considered solely as a component of GDP, but as a lever for promoting collective well-being and quality of life. With this in mind, sustainability policies must be oriented towards a "wellness economy," based on principles of circular economy, sustainable mobility, energy efficiency, and social inclusion. Only through integrated and participatory territorial planning will it be possible to transform sustainability from a rhetorical statement into a concrete practice of territorial enhancement and the promotion of truly equitable, lasting, and inclusive development. For example, urban growth and infrastructure expansion profoundly modify the landscape, altering ecosystems and natural cycles. At the same time, productive activities and resource use contribute to shaping geographical space, determining impacts that can be both positive, such as improving living conditions, and negative, such as environmental degradation.

It is therefore essential to adopt effective strategies for sustainable resource management to ensure a balance between societal needs and environmental protection. Territorial planning policies, for instance, must favor development models compatible with ecosystem conservation, promoting solutions that reduce land consumption and minimize pollution. The transition to a circular economy, improved sustainable mobility, and the enhancement of natural heritage are essential elements for building a future where humans and the environment can coexist in harmony.

Only through this integrated perspective can the complexity of environmental challenges be addressed, recognizing the active role of humans in transforming the territory and identifying

solutions that allow for safeguarding global ecological balance. The understanding and application of an interdisciplinary approach are therefore indispensable for ensuring sustainable and responsible development.

Ethics recognizes the environment as a value and implies, together with the enhancement of territories, the assumption of responsibility. The systemic approach represents a method of analysis that allows for considering reality in its complexity, overcoming fragmented and sectoral visions. This type of perspective is based on some fundamental characteristics, such as holographic vision, which allows for grasping the interconnections between the various components of a system, evolutionary dynamism, which recognizes the continuous change of the elements involved, and feedback mechanisms, through which actions and influences impact the system itself, generating new outcomes.

Applying this methodology to territorial prevention offers a series of significant advantages. The ability to interact synergistically across different disciplines makes it possible to integrate the protection of cultural heritage, the enhancement of natural beauty, and the safeguarding of environmental health. This is a process that goes beyond simple conservation, aiming instead at a dynamic and innovative management of the territory, capable of adapting to social and economic changes.

A crucial aspect of this strategy is the balance between the economies and cultures of the coast and the hinterland. Often these two realities are treated separately, without considering the profound relationships that unite them. Adopting a systemic vision means recognizing that the development of a coastal area can directly influence the economic and cultural dynamics of inland areas and vice versa. It is therefore essential to design integrated policies that favor dialogue and collaboration between these territories, stimulating opportunities for shared and sustainable growth.

Only through an interdisciplinary and complexity-oriented approach is it possible to address contemporary challenges related to environmental and territorial management, promoting balanced development models capable of ensuring a sustainable future.

The environment, understood in its broadest sense, represents the place where humans are inserted and develop their existence. It is not simply a set of natural elements but constitutes a space of complex interaction between the physical and symbolic dimensions, between material and immaterial assets. The land we walk on, the air we breathe, the water we consume, and the biodiversity that surrounds us form the essential infrastructure of life, but they do not exhaust the concept of environment. To these are added the aesthetic value of landscapes, the culture that shapes the way of inhabiting space, and the traditions that shape collective behaviors. In this sense, the environment is configured as a dynamic construction in which natural and anthropogenic elements intertwine, giving form to the reality we perceive and experience.

Evaluating environmental conditions cannot occur through an exclusively naturalistic analysis, based on criteria of greater or lesser "naturalness." The environment exists when it responds to the needs of living beings, particularly humans, who seek satisfaction there for both material and immaterial needs. The quality of life of a population depends not only on the availability of natural resources but also on the possibility of living in a harmonious context, rich in cultural and social meanings. A degraded landscape or a territory stripped of its identity characteristics can compromise people's well-being as much as the lack of essential resources.

The contemporary challenge consists precisely in recognizing this interdependence and building environmental management strategies that take into account the multiple dimensions that characterize it. Conservation cannot be understood solely as the protection of pristine nature, but must include the

safeguarding of cultural values, local traditions, and the livability of spaces. A balanced environment is one that manages to satisfy the material and immaterial needs of individuals, ensuring them a harmonious relationship with the world around them.

Wellness Economy as a Tool for Environmental Protection and the Affirmation of an Economy of Beauty

The wellness economy is founded on the premise that individual and collective well-being is closely dependent on the quality of the environment in which one lives. It is not merely about preserving biodiversity or mitigating the effects of environmental degradation, but about adopting territorial management strategies that integrally improve the quality of life, fostering sustainable development of productive and tourist activities.

One of the core principles of this approach is the connection between health, environment, and economy: a well-cared-for territory, characterized by a healthy ecosystem and responsible resource management, becomes not only a favorable place for community life but also an engine of economic growth. Environmental sustainability, in fact, translates into an increase in territorial attractiveness, favoring investments that generate opportunities for the local economic fabric and encouraging the creation of entrepreneurial models focused on enhancing natural and cultural heritage.

The integration of productive activities and environmental protection is therefore an essential element of the wellness economy. Tourism, for example, can play a leading role in territorial enhancement, not only as a source of income but also as a tool for disseminating a culture of sustainability. Tourism models based on the responsible use of ecosystems, the protection of landscapes, and local food and wine contribute to making economic activities functional to the protection and promotion of the environment.

In this sense, a well-managed territory generates a virtuous cycle: environmental quality improves people's lives, fosters sustainable practices, attracts investments, and supports a balanced and resilient economy. The wellness economy, therefore, represents an innovative paradigm that recognizes the strategic value of a healthy environment, not only as an element of well-being but as a fundamental lever for a more sustainable and inclusive economic system.

In recent decades, the analysis of natural phenomena has undergone a paradigm shift, moving from a purely descriptive approach to a systemic and interconnected vision. It is no longer just about studying the environment in terms of resources and biological processes, but about understanding its relationships with society, economy, and politics. In this context, sustainability emerges as a guiding principle for rethinking the development model.

The relationship between environment, sustainability, and the development model is crucial. Sustainability, understood in its triple dimension – environmental, economic, and social – requires overcoming an economy based on quantity, oriented towards maximizing production and consumption. In its place, the concept of qualitative development is affirmed, which focuses on the quality of life, the well-being of communities, and the balance between productive needs and ecosystem protection.

In this scenario, the economy of beauty and, in particular, the wellness economy play a central role. The latter enhances people's well-being through territorial care and environmental quality, promoting economic activities in harmony with nature. A healthy environment generates not only ecological benefits but also economic and social ones, contributing to improving the quality of life and encouraging responsible investments. The paradigm shift is not only theoretical but translates into a new ethical approach, based on the search for a balance between ethics, politics, and economy. From

this perspective, economic growth is no longer seen as an end in itself but as a means to develop individual and collective capacities, generating global and local well-being. The challenge is to build a model that allows for combining progress and sustainability, fostering a "new alliance" between social and institutional actors to ensure a more harmonious and inclusive future.

The Culture of Grapevine and Olive as a Paradigm of the Ethics of Care and Sustainability

The cultivation of olives and grapevines represents a paradigmatic example of interaction between nature and anthropization, with roots deeply embedded in the ancient history of Mediterranean civilizations. These cultivations have contributed to shaping landscapes of extraordinary beauty, where the balance between human activities and the environment has generated territories rich in aesthetic and cultural value.

The olive tree, a symbol of peace and longevity, has always been a central element in agricultural and gastronomic tradition. Olives and olive oil, in addition to being fundamental ingredients of the Mediterranean diet, represent a *trait d'union* between the hinterland and the coast, uniting different territories through production and trade. Similarly, the grapevine and wine production have shaped the landscape and food culture, with pairings ranging from traditional coastal dishes to those of mountainous areas, such as "cucina bianca," typical of the Alpine regions.

In a systemic approach, olive and grapevine are not just cultivations, but integrated parts of a heritage that includes natural beauties, artistic heritage, and popular traditions. Their enhancement cannot disregard a vision that combines sustainability and territorial protection, promoting agricultural practices respectful of the environment and capable of preserving biodiversity. This model fits perfectly into the concept of the circular economy, where responsible resource management fosters a virtuous cycle of production and consumption. Sustainability is not only an environmental objective but also an ethical principle that guides economic and social development, ensuring the continuity of millennia-old traditions and the safeguarding of the landscapes that make the Mediterranean unique. The systemic approach to sustainability is based on a fundamental principle: care as a recursive element that connects individual, social, and environmental well-being. This model recognizes that self-care is not an isolated act, but part of a broader process involving the community and the territory. Self-care represents the first step: it means adopting healthy habits, cultivating one's psychophysical balance, and developing an awareness of one's role in the world. When a person takes care of themselves, they are more inclined to extend this attention to others, fostering relationships based on respect and solidarity.

From this arises care for others, which translates into a commitment to the community, the promotion of shared values, and the building of a more equitable and inclusive society. This step is essential for creating a strong social fabric, where individual well-being intertwines with collective well-being. Finally, care for the environment completes the cycle: a healthy and well-managed territory improves the quality of life, favors sustainable development, and ensures resources for future generations. The protection of the ecosystem is not only an ethical responsibility but also a necessity for maintaining the balance between humans and nature.

This recursive loop of care creates a development model in which every element is interconnected, generating a virtuous cycle of well-being. For this approach to become a shared ethical reference, it is necessary to promote policies and practices that integrate sustainability into every aspect of life, from individual health to territorial management.