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**Conservation Policies as Local
Development Policies: The Case of the
Italian National Parks**

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CONSERVATION POLICIES AS LOCAL DEVELOPMENT POLICIES: THE CASE OF THE ITALIAN NATIONAL PARKS

di Antonio G. Calafati* e Francesca Mazzoni**

Summary

After briefly discussing the extent and features of Italian national parks, this paper takes some steps toward building a conceptual system for conservation policies in national parks where cultural capital as well as natural capital is subject to conservation. It argues that in protected territories where human landscapes predominate over natural ones, conservation policies ought to be conceptualised as development policies. Constraining property rights on local resources – which is the conventional view on conservation policies – should be set in the context of a more broadly encompassing approach whose key element is the regulation of the development trajectories of local systems.

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1. Introduction

Conservation policies have sharply increased their importance in Italy over the past decade. Today, Italian national parks – identified by their ‘social boundaries’ – cover about 10% of the national territory, and if all types of protected area are considered the territory to which conservation policies apply amounts to about 14% of the national space. Accordingly, how effective conservation policies are – or might be – has become an issue of some importance, and the methodological issues of their design and implementation should be a matter of much wider scientific concern. It is time to acknowledge that conservation policies occupy a significant position in Italy’s overall system of public policy.

Conservation policies as regards the Italian national parks raise specific methodological questions. Even cursory examination of the *territory* of most of Italy’s national parks – and also many of its regional parks – shows that human landscapes largely predominate over natural ones. This is not unusual in Europe: in Great Britain, for instance, human landscapes were the focus of conservation policies throughout the last century. But when conservation policies are targeted on human landscapes, there arise specific methodological questions which have not yet been extensively discussed. Yet the methodological shortcomings of conservation policies is a major and urgent issue in Italy, where such a large part of the territory is – or is expected to be – influenced by this class of policies.

This paper takes some steps toward building a conceptual system for conservation policies in national parks where cultural capital as well as natural capital is subject to conservation. It argues that in protected territories where human landscapes predominate over natural ones, conservation policies ought to be conceptualised as development policies. Constraining property rights on local resources – which is the conventional conception of conservation policies – should be set in the context of a more broadly encompassing approach whose key element is the regulation of the development trajectories of local systems.

After setting the scene by briefly discussing the extent and

features of Italian protected areas (section 2), the paper (sections 3, 4 and 5) develops a categorical framework in which conservation policies can be coherently interpreted as development policies.

2. The territory of the Italian national parks

The Italian history of conservation has taken a remarkable turn in the past decade. A substantial number of new natural parks were established in the Nineties, and today the territorial size of protected areas as well as their variety are of notable proportions. Given the remarkable ecological and historical richness of the Italian territory, it is hardly necessary to justify the new course that has been taken. It should be stressed, however, that it was the law on protected areas (“Legge quadro sulle aree protette”, Legge 394/91) which opened the way for a new approach to conservation policy. This law introduced an articulated institutional setting for the management of protected areas, striking a balance between the national and local perspectives. Moreover, it led directly to the establishment of numerous new national parks, so that in Italy there are now 22 national parks covering a surface area of about 1.4 million hectares (Ministero dell’ambiente, 2002) (Table 1).

The territory protected through national parks is greater in extent, in fact, because their ‘social boundaries’ – that is the area of the local systems of the parks – have to be considered.¹ In this case, the protected surface area can be usefully approximated to the total surface of the municipalities whose territories are completely or partly

¹ Defining the borders of inhabited parks is difficult because there are relationships – between ecosystems, landscape units and economies – between the territory of a natural park and its adjacent territories which mean that they are rarely easy to draw. Italian legislation on protected areas provides a solution by allowing for the introduction of ‘contiguous areas’, that is, areas adjacent to parks and subject to special protection as well, even though it is less strict.

contained within national park perimeters.² If this criterion is used, the territory of the Italian national parks increases to 2.8 million hectares (about 10% per cent of the national territory). The law on protected areas also provides for the designation of regional natural parks and natural reserves, the total surface of which amounts to about 1.5 million hectares. Hence, if we consider all the categories of protected area, the Italian territory subject to special protection amounts to 4.3 million hectares, or 14 per cent of the national territory.

The 1991 law on protected areas was a watershed in the history of Italian conservation policies, not only because it greatly extended the country's protected territory, or because it introduced a new institutional setting, but also because it gave notable importance to the conservation of cultural capital – besides that of natural capital. Indeed, the Italian national parks established in the Nineties are very much inhabited parks, and the territories are largely constituted by rural landscapes. If Italian protected territory (national parks) is defined as previously indicated, its resident population in 1998 amounted to 2.4 million persons.

In 1951 the territory of the Italian national parks (contiguous areas included) comprised practically the same proportion of the population as it does today – although it should be borne in mind that there are striking differences among the economic performances of national parks, and also among local systems belonging to the same national park.³ After three decades of economic and social decay, in the Eighties most of the territories covered by the national parks began to show signs of recovery, and the issue of local development moved on to the policy agenda.⁴

² This criterion has the advantage to make the main level of local governance in Italy – Municipalities – overlapping with that of the national parks.

³ See Compagnucci and Mazzoni (2002) for a preliminary analysis of the spatial organisation of Italian national parks.

⁴ Most national parks still had more inhabitants in the nineteenth century, before permanent emigration took place as the only possible means to restore

Historical studies show that human settlements on the territory of Italian protected areas began significantly to alter their natural ecosystems and landscapes in the fifteenth century (Antonietti, 1989; Bätzing, 1987; Calafati and Sori, 2002; Viazzo, 1989). There is consequently an extraordinary richness to be conserved in Italy's national parks: human landscapes of outstanding scenic interest, towns and villages of distinctive medieval character, habitats and ecosystems of great value. This cultural heritage is not only the outcome of the varied and evolving relationship between man and nature; it expresses the life, culture and history of local societies which have evolved along specific trajectories.

As inhabited areas, the Italian national parks have a predominant rural dimension centred on urban centres of great historical importance. They are traditionally rural areas in which primary industry has played a relatively minor role in shaping the landscape.⁵ Indeed, the territory generated and re-generated by the economic process – agriculture, forestry, pastoral farming, settlement activities – constitutes a large part of the national parks established in the Nineties. Overall, 76 per cent of the territory of the municipalities belonging to 22 Italian national parks is farmed (about 2 million hectares). Moreover, the proportion of used agricultural land in the total agricultural land is on average 50 per cent (Table 2).⁶

Italian national parks have features that challenge the methodological foundations and practical significance of traditional conceptions of conservation policies. Firstly, with 14% of the national territory turned into 'protected areas', conservation policies are an important policy instrument which inevitably intersects with all other public policies exerting direct or indirect territorial effects. Secondly,

balance to the *local* relationship between man and resources.

⁵ See CEESTAT (1996) for a preliminary analysis of the agricultural sector in the territory of the Italian National parks.

⁶ The proportion between used agricultural land and the territory of the municipalities is on average 38 per cent.

Italian national parks are territories in which man-made landscapes predominate, and in which local communities engage in different types of economic activity. Thirdly, Italian national parks have no internal territorial homogeneity, each of them being spatially organised into a number of local systems of different size and complexity, following specific development trajectories and often embedded in the economic dynamics of adjacent and often densely populated areas. There is consequently more than one factor to prompt exploration of the methodological basis on which to build a new generation of conservation policies.⁷

3. Progressive local systems and conservation

The first task traditionally addressed by conservation policies is identifying – which invariably entails conceptualising – the ‘object’ of conservation, that is, the natural and cultural capital that such policies are expected to preserve. A second and related task is evaluating the *state* of the capital at time $t=t_0$ (Giacomini e Romani, 1980; Gambino, 1991). The concept of ‘conservation’ can be reformulated as a standard which society assigns to the state of ‘capital’ over period of time (t_0, t_k) .

Conservation policies assume rather different meanings according to the position of the targeted elements of capital in the economic process. If the elements of capital are dis-connected from the economic process, conservation policies simply amount to preventing their transformation into ‘resources’. But if the element of the capital considered is already a resource, and therefore co-evolves with the economic process, conservation policies concern themselves with the potential evolution of the state of that particular capital

⁷ The inadequacy of the conceptual basis of traditional conservation policies has repeatedly surfaced on the British discourse on conservation. See, for instance, MacEwen and MacEwen (1982), MacEwen and MacEwen (1987), Winter (1996).

element.⁸

Explaining or predicting the evolution of the state of the cultural and natural capital elements in natural parks which co-evolve with the economic process logically requires specification of the factors that influence those elements. The shaping of human landscapes in natural parks – the object of conservation – must be related to the direct and indirect effects of the *local* economic process, that is, to the transformation of matter/energy and information that takes place locally.⁹ Yet, according to the methodological prescriptions of development economics,¹⁰ one must go deeper and enquire as to the ‘mechanism’ which generates the local economic *process* actually observed. According to the categorical system of development economics, it is the ‘local system’ – with its specific structure – that generates the economic process which exerts effects on the ‘object of conservation’. In fact, co-evolution takes place between the structure of the local system and the object of conservation.

Figure 1 depicts what can be called the ‘structure’ linking the local system to the object of conservation policy in inhabited national parks. In this regard, a crucial step in any conservation policy should

⁸ The term ‘co-evolution’ is used here to refer to the circular causal relationship between the state of capital and the economic process (cf. Bateson, 1979; Boulding, 1968; Dopfer, 1991; Radzicki, 1988).

⁹ This conception of the production process dates back to Georgescu-Roegen (1971), whose distinction between ‘fund elements’ – the tools of the production process – and ‘fund elements’ – flow of matter/energy and information – is extremely useful when a ‘systemic approach’ is taken to the study of local development.

¹⁰ ‘Development economics’ is understood here not as an ‘area of study’ but rather as a ‘methodological perspective’ on how to frame and analyse the phenomenon of change in economics (Hirschman, 1958; Schultz, 1990). The institutional dimension of economic change is a key feature of development economics (Myrdal, 1965; Hamilton, 1970; North, 1990), and so too is its cognitive dimension (North, 1990; Rodwin and Schön, 1994).

be identification of the appropriate set of local (social) systems into which, in each national park, the territory is organized. These local systems are the ‘mechanisms’ that drive the economic process and hence produce the flow of effects affecting the state of capital. The system/process dichotomy, in fact, highlights that the local system generates a flow of effects per unit of time. If the local system is in a stationary state the *same* flow of effects per unit of time affects the capital.

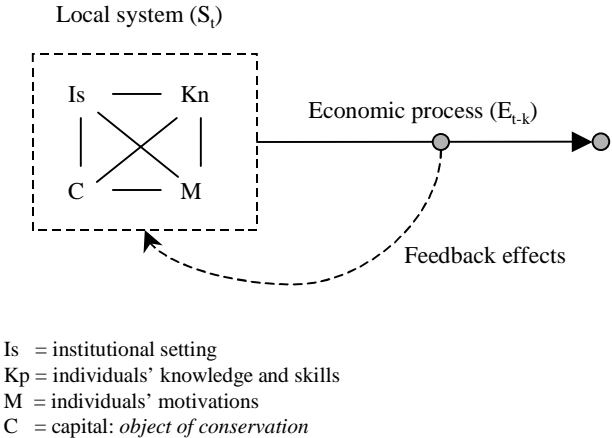


Figure 1 – Capital as *object of conservation* and the economic process

However convenient it may be for analytical purposes to assume *stationary local* systems, conservation policy must necessarily deal with the issue of ‘economic change’. When addressing the relationships between economic process and capital, one must start from the hypothesis that local systems – also those to be found in Italian national parks – are in fact *progressive systems* (Waddington, 1977). Their *structure* – and not only their scale – changes over time, following an evolutionary trajectory determined by diverse exogenous and endogenous factors. Not only do they change in scale over time, as a consequence of accumulation (or de-accumulation), but they also change in their structure. Their evolution therefore does not modify the scale (and the productivity) of the economic process alone; it also modifies technology, types of commodities produced, individuals’ knowledge and motivation, and other structural elements of local

society (Calafati, 2000).

It is innovation that turns a *stationary* local system into a *progressive* one. The system's evolutionary path depends on how innovations – private and collective – arise and spread. In turn, the different ways in which innovations spread depend on the relational network that characterises the local system.¹¹ Local systems contain a network of economic (and social) relationships, and it is this network that shapes the diffusion and propagation of individual and collective innovations. Individual and collective innovations are therefore important in themselves because of the emergent effects that they generate by spreading or propagating in the system.¹²

Taking progressive local systems, and the specific features of their development trajectories, as starting points for the elaboration of conservation policies is mandatory in the case of most Italian national parks. It is a step that can be safely undertaken., considering how much knowledge has accumulated in the research and policy fields of local development. The difficulty is putting this knowledge to use in the context of conservation planning. Policy-makers and analysts should, however, eschew the sort of 'exceptionalism' which views national parks as territories of a different kind. In fact, inhabited national parks distinguish themselves from the rest of the territory by the standard of conservation that societies set for them, not by the factors that shape local development trajectories.

¹¹ Whilst dynamic models focus on changes in the scale of the economic process (and on the connected change in efficiency in the use of resources), developmental (or evolutionary) models concentrate on changes in the structure of the systems that generate the economic process (cf. Hirschman, 1958; Boulding, 1968; North, 1990).

¹² Given the network of the interdependencies and the time that an innovation takes to propagate – and the fact that any (individual and collective) agent is potentially an innovator – at any moment the system is in progress, set in motion by different causal sequences, some of which are dominant, that constantly keep it out of stationary state (Lindblom and Hirschman, 1962).

4. Conservation policies as development policies

The methodological perspective outlined in the previous section suggests that conservation policies should be sharply re-orientated. The starting point for the designing of conservation policies should be not the elements of capital, as has traditionally been the case in the planning of natural parks, *but rather the structure of the local systems concerned at time $t=t_0$ and their evolutionary potential*. Expected changes in the state of the capital in natural parks should be related to the evolutionary trajectories followed by the pertinent local system. The relationship between them should be the focus of any conservation policy.

Starting from this premise, conservation policies can be understood as development policies, that is, as policies with which decision-makers endeavour to regulate the development trajectories of local systems. Since the degree of capital conservation is the cumulated outcome (with a temporal lag) of sequences of external effects produced by the economic process and generated by the local system, the structure and scale of the local system are the ‘causal factor’ of changes occurring in the state of capital. The policy-induced modification of the structure of the local system may be regarded as an intermediate objective, while change in the state of the capital is the final one.

The logical links between changes in the economic process and changes in the state of capital are illustrated in Figure 2. The external effects associated with the economic process are ultimately triggered by the structure of the local system. But the structure of the local system changes in time as a consequence of self-organisation dynamics (the combination of individual innovations) and as a consequence of regulation policies (the combination of the relevant set of territorial policies). As a result, the vector of external effects – and therefore the shocks to which capital is exposed – changes in time.

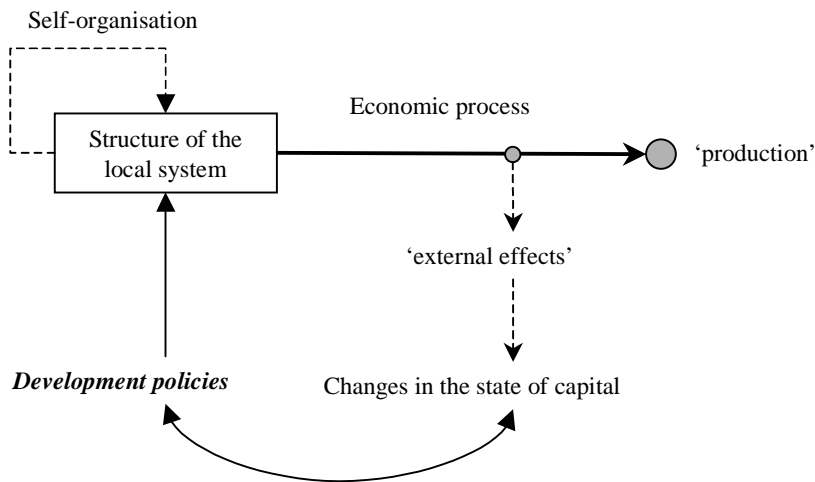


Figure 2 – Development policies and conservation policies

Although the need to identify the structure connecting the organisation of the local system with capital has long been recognised in the literature on conservation policy (see, in particular, Giacomini and Romani, 1980; Gambino 1991; Gambino, 1997), conservation policies are usually based on a static – and ultimately only a descriptive – representation of the natural and cultural capital. By focusing on changing the property rights to resources, conservation policies take a sort of ‘shortcut’ to avoid the complex problems posed by identifying and regulating the evolutionary trajectories of the pertinent local systems.¹³ This shortcut may work when conservation

¹³ The issue of the regulation of local systems does not seem to have received much attention in the literature on local development. This is probably because a *sufficient* self-organisation capacity of local systems is the premise implicit in most interpretative models (cf. Dematteis, 1994). But this assumption reflects the social preference function utilised by implication to evaluate local performances. When the evolutionary trajectories of a local system are evaluated, the variables that enter the preference function – as a consequence of a collective decision – may be very different indeed. The perspective taken by analysts in studying the evolution of a local system may change as well.

policies are targeted on elements of local capital which play a negligible role in the local economic process. But it cannot work with regard to elements of local capital which are either extensively used or, indeed, generated by the economic process itself – as is the case of all semi-natural ecosystems.

In a dynamic social context, changes in the resources property rights regime have immediate or postponed, direct and indirect, deep and widespread effects on the economic process – and income generation – such that it is impossible or meaningless not to discuss them in terms of their economic implications. Moreover, the property rights regime that conservation may want to change is in its turn the starting point for other classes of territorial policies, for instance agricultural. Therefore, changing this regime without an integrated model of its economic effects, and also of the feasibility and efficacy of other classes of policies, may prove to be self-defeating.

In natural parks where human landscapes predominate – or at least constitute a large part of the territory – conservation policies interpreted as constraining individual and collective property rights on local capital must be part of encompassing local development policies. Conservation policies must be framed and evaluated in the context of the evolutionary trajectory of local society.

5. Implementing development policies in natural parks

In the previous sections we put forward three main arguments. Firstly, the flow of effects affecting the state of capital per unit of time must be related to the scale and structure of the pertinent local system. Secondly, local systems are progressive systems and their structure changes over time, with the consequence that the flow of effects on capital which they generate changes. Thirdly, in order to regulate changes in the state of the capital, policy makers must endeavour to regulate the evolution of the pertinent local systems. Against this background, development policies in national parks – that is, in

Moreover, reference to diverse evaluation functions of the performances may be necessary while addressing different types of local systems.

territories to which society expects that strict standards of conservation will apply – should be based on the following four pillars.

Identifying the local systems

In Italian national parks, identifying the protected area's borders does not solve the problem of identifying the relevant local social systems. It is obvious that the territory of the Italian national parks (and often of regional parks as well) is highly differentiated. Indeed, the distinctive feature of Italian national parks is that their territories can – indeed, must – be divided into a number of different local systems, each following its own development trajectory. The spatial organisation of Italian territory, as well as that of the Apennines and Alps, where most of the national parks are located, has been profoundly shaped by the phenomenon of 'territorial coalescence' (Calafati, 2002). Territorial coalescence has generated *new patterns of spatial interdependence* which do not correspond to the institutionalised representation of the territory. These new patterns are the spatial level at which processes of territorial self-organisation express themselves. They are also the level at which effective development policies can be implemented.

Indeed, one of the key problems of conservation policies in Italy is how to come to terms with the actual spatial organisation of the territory of the natural parks, so that the 'localities' generating the effects on local capital can be identified, modelled, and regulated by appropriate and highly specific public policies.

Understanding the nature of local development

The presence of local communities in natural parks immediately poses the problem of reconciling the traditional logic of conservation with that of local development. Secondly, it is the logic of the capital conservation itself that requires specific forms of economic development in national park local systems.

The shift in local societies from 'exit' to 'voice' – against the

background of what can be called ‘territorial loyalty’ – raises the issue of local development in national parks.¹⁴ Local communities demand – and rightly expect – to be given opportunities to improve their standard of living locally. Individuals want to design and implement effective development plans in their own community.¹⁵ These expectations are now firmly established – also as a consequence of two decades of the territorial policies which stem from them – and it is impossible for conservation policies in inhabited national parks to circumvent them.

Contrary to what it is often claimed, economic development does not by definition come into conflict with the objectives of capital conservation. In many cases – and certainly in that of Italy – economic development is in fact a precondition for conservation in national parks. Very often, an increase in the scale of the economic process, for instance, generates a change that judged by the prevailing social preference function – and on the basis of the distinctive evaluation function of the protected areas – increases the value of capital. The relationship between economic development and the conservation of human landscapes in natural park is ‘open’ (Calafati and Mazzoni, 2001). Changes in the economic structure – either at a level of composition of the vector of resources utilised or at a level of technological change – are able to generate positive or adverse changes in the degree of sustainability of the economic process and in the value of capital.

Matching conservation objectives with evolutionary trajectories

Italy’s natural parks can today be regarded as territories

¹⁴ The ‘exit’/‘voice’ dichotomy – see Hirschman (1970) – sheds useful light on the shift that has occurred in local communities in the last two decades with regard to the pursuit of local development.

¹⁵ For a general discussion of the ‘local development issue’ from a variety of methodological perspective and vantage points – and also with regard to the planning process – see Blakely (1994) and Bingham and Mier (1993).

endowed with extremely ambitious regulation mechanisms. The already-mentioned law on protected areas has introduced an integrated set of tools and procedures in order: a) to assess the state of the landscape and the level of economic and social development in the territory concerned; b) to establish objectives in terms of landscape conservation and the degree of economic and social development. The Italian national parks are territories where in principle the state of capital is evaluated on the basis of a matrix that integrates the various levels at which the external effects of the economic process are described.¹⁶ In Italy, conservation policies are highly ambitious in so far as they involve *fully integrated* evaluation of the territory.

Yet the obstacles raised against implementation of new conservation policies in Italy over the last decade stem primarily from a lack of awareness that conservation policies now assume the nature of development policies. The planning process still focuses on constraining the property rights on resources, and local development policies focus on ‘development projects’, rather than on the entire constellation of factors which shape the evolution of local systems.

The question of choosing the standard of conservation in Italy’s natural parks cannot – and hence should not – be separated from the question of choosing the appropriate development trajectories. When observed in terms of the development trajectories that would make them possible, some conservation objectives manifest their unrealism and others their attainability.

Integrating territorial policies in national parks

Inhabited natural parks in modern societies are territories targeted by a number of different policies. The Italian natural parks agencies are only one of the many policy makers entitled to change

¹⁶ The Italian law on protected areas introduced two procedures to evaluate and regulate the trajectories of local systems relevant to protected areas: the “park plan” and the “economic and social development plan” (“Legge quadro sulle aree protette”, 1991).

the local institutional setting – for instance by changing economic incentives and norms, or investing in public infrastructures. Each policy is deemed to interact with other policies at the level of their local effects. And it is not possible to segment the policy domain.¹⁷ Local development trajectories arise from the intersection of the effects of public policies, compounded with private innovations.

This raises two issues. Firstly, as already stressed, conservation policies as constraints on property rights cannot be distinguished (and separated) from local development policies. Secondly, local development policies cannot be other than *integrated policies*, that is, ‘complex policies’ made up of a set of interdependent interventions pertaining to different policy makers. Therefore, not only must natural parks agencies conceptualise conservation policy as development policy, they must also integrate their development plans into an overall and coherent development plan emerging from the interaction among all the policy makers concerned.

6. Conclusions

Without full awareness of the practical implications and methodological difficulties, conservation policy has been given a remarkable role in Italy: that of the policy instrument which directly ‘governs’ about 14% of the entire national territory. Considering the extraordinary cultural and ecological value of Italian landscapes, the role assigned to conservation policies within the overall system of public policies is not surprising or unwarranted. Indeed, it is coherent with the new orientation toward environmental and social sustainability. Yet if conservation policies are to be effective, they must be given an appropriate conceptual basis.

This paper has argued that conservation policies for inhabited national parks should be interpreted as local development policies.

¹⁷ Local systems in national parks are sufficiently ‘small’ and ‘thick’ to rule out the possibility of segmented development policies.

Firstly, the Italian national parks comprise local communities of notable scale and complexity. Secondly, these communities are engaged in economic activities that directly and indirectly affect the state of the natural and cultural capital subject to conservation. Thirdly, these communities are progressive local systems which follow specific development trajectories under the general impetus of innovations. If the high standards of conservation appropriate for a natural park are to be met, are the development trajectories of the local communities concerned that should be regulated. What is needed are development policies which incorporate the logic and aims of conservation policies, or conservation policies which turns themselves into development policies.

Statistical appendix

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