

RESEARCH ARTICLE

State intervention to bridge the gap: The modernisation of rural Southern Italy (1950–1962)

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Abstract

This paper explores the modernisation of rural Southern Italy between 1950 and 1962, focusing on the role of the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno, a public entity created to address the socio-economic divide between the North and South of Italy. The Cassa was central to the restructuring of rural areas, promoting land reclamation, infrastructure development, and the electrification of agricultural regions. The study examines how the ‘agrarian question’ intersected with the broader ‘Southern question’, reflecting persistent economic disparities within Italy. By analysing the early stages (1950–1962) of extraordinary intervention, this article demonstrates that modernisation efforts were aimed not only at reducing regional imbalances but also at addressing structural deficiencies that hindered agricultural productivity. While significant progress was made in modernising rural Southern Italy, this paper argues that the foundational agricultural reforms, although vital, needed to be complemented by broader industrial policies to ensure long-term socio-economic convergence with the more developed North.

Introduction

The representation of the South of Italy as a national ‘problem’ has originated not only from economic data but also from cultural and discursive constructions. Stereotypes and prejudices fuelled a vision of the South as backward and in need of external intervention to develop. This narrative has influenced both historiography and public policy, often without considering local specificities and the region’s internal potential (Schneider, 1998). In recent decades, however, the historiography has begun to re-evaluate this approach to Southern Italy, mainly because reflections more attentive to the study of quantitative and qualitative sources have highlighted, in an original and contextual way, the positive action of the season of ‘*intervento straordinario*’¹ between 1950 and 1962 (Lepore, 2013; Palermo, 2019; Giannola, 2015). This stands in contrast to the literature that emphasised inefficiencies, waste of public resources, and the so-called ‘cathedrals in the desert’ (white elephants), as metaphors for industrial policies in southern Italy that did not take care to build local infrastructures and stimulate the formation of territorial entrepreneurship. In short, this element of the literature on extraordinary intervention criticises its top-down policy formation and implementation, arguing that it contributed to the failure of these interventions, making the Mezzogiorno an area still dependent on the North for its economic development.

The focus of this article is the first phase of ‘extraordinary intervention’ in the Mezzogiorno (1950–1962), the period in which the founders of the Cassa del Mezzogiorno, an entity modelled on the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), oversaw the restructuring and modernisation of the rural areas of the South as the method for reducing the socio-economic gap between the South and

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the North of the country. This was framed by a development model that also identified simultaneous support for processes of economic growth and social inclusion as a link to the development policies of the World Bank. Particularly influential was the Big Push model of Paul Rosenstein-Rodan, at the time both deputy director of the Economic Division and head of the Committee of Experts of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and a member of the Board of Directors of the Society for the Development of Industry in Southern Italy (Svimez). In particular, this article aims to examine how the intersection between the ‘agrarian question’ and the ‘southern question’ influenced the development strategies adopted to modernise the rural Mezzogiorno and how important the infrastructure of the territory was within strategy as a whole. Furthermore, it examines how far the existence of what can be defined as a ‘triple gap’ (inland areas/coastal strip of the Mezzogiorno; South-North; Italy-Western Europe) stimulated the first phase of the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno’s intervention (1950–1962), when interventions focused on the reduction of the divide starting from the modernisation of the rural Mezzogiorno.

The history of Southern Italy after the unification of 1861 has often been interpreted through the lens of economic underdevelopment compared to the North. However, this approach risks simplifying a complex historical reality, where multiple political, social, and cultural factors influenced the region’s integration into the new unitary state, which entailed the imposition of administrative and legal structures foreign to local traditions, generating discontent and resistance. The phenomenon of post-unification brigandage is an emblematic example of this, interpreted not only as widespread criminality but also as a form of social protest against the new elites (Salvemini, 1963). The agrarian structure of the Mezzogiorno, dominated by the latifundium (large estates) with significant expanses of land in the hands of a few owners and a mass of landless peasants or small tenants, fuelled social tensions and limited the possibilities of autonomous economic development. The agrarian question was an economic problem but also a social and political one, influencing local and national power dynamics (Gramsci, 1975).

Central-northern Italy was characterised by different forms of land tenure. As pointed out by Malanima (Malanima, 2013), the difference between the two areas did not lie in the industriousness of the population but in the productivity of the soil and fluctuating values of different agricultural sectors and products. Historically, the possibility of breeding livestock was limited in the South due to the hilly and mountainous nature of the territory, while in the North, the Po Valley and the pre-Alpine valleys allowed breeding, increasing the production of manure and, consequently, soil fertility. This resulted in different production relations: in the South, the large latifundium prevailed, while in the North, sharecropping and landed property were more common, which influenced the formation of a different degree of interest on the part of the peasants in modernising their means of work to improve agricultural yields. In the southern latifundia, productive stagnation, the low fertility of the soil, and the lack of attention paid to modernising production methods by the latifundial barons, who lived on agrarian rents but moved to large cities like Naples, oppressed the peasants, who concentrated their efforts on family subsistence.

The economic policies adopted by the early post-unification governments tended to favour the industrialisation of the North, often to the detriment of the South. Customs tariffs, infrastructure investments, and taxation contributed to accentuating the economic dualism between the two areas of the country (Romeo, 1959). De Rosa emphasises that the South had often been seen as a ‘subordinate province’, a region dependent on political and economic decisions taken elsewhere, mainly in favour of the northern regions, also due to the absence of an entrepreneurial middle class in the Mezzogiorno that could assert its rights, a lack that was also ascribed, in his reflections, to the persistence of the latifundist conduction of land in the South (De Rosa, 2004). A purely political explanation does not do justice to the complexity of the interactions between the state and southern society; however, for example, not even the alienation of state and ecclesiastical property, promoted by Quintino Sella in 1867, helped the fragmented rural society of southern Italy to free itself from the old latifundist bonds (Barone, 2013). Cavour, who had been the prime minister of

the Savoy kingdom, also inspired the first generation of the national ruling class despite his premature death. In fact, in the first thirty years of unification, the Cavour-inspired programme of natural growth of the agricultural sector through full trade liberalisation failed due to the shortcomings of *laissez-faire* and crumbled in the face of the ‘transport revolution’, which allowed Russian and American wheat, as well as Chinese and Indian silk, to invade European markets from the late 1860s. The crisis hit very hard, especially for countries like Italy, with high percentages of the working population engaged in the primary sector. Plans were made to overcome the difficulties of the Mezzogiorno specifically through land reclamation, aimed at extending the amount of cultivable land, as well as the introduction of new irrigation courses and different rotation methods (Farolfi, Fornasari, 2011). A law by Minister Baccarini in 1882 allocated funds for agricultural redevelopment through land reclamation and hydrogeological reorganisation (Novello, 2003). These interventions were partial and inadequately conducted, however, while a solution was sought in the political sphere. Thus, in 1887–1888, the state launched protectionist measures on cereal products, which were maintained even after the economic downturn, but which mainly favoured the agricultural sector in the already advanced central-northern areas, rich in agrarian consortia, workers’ leagues, and other types of associations reflecting the structure of land ownership in that part of the country (Crainz, Nenci, 1991). These associations also promoted the spread of new agricultural techniques, the use of chemical fertilisers, the iron plough, and new crops, especially those related to the textile industry. In addition, the development of the railway network favoured large northern groups interested in outlet markets.

The South was not affected by this dynamism. While the protectionist tariff defended cereal cultivation, it penalised the cultivation of more exportable crops, such as olives, vines, and fruit trees. Moreover, the physical geography of the South did not allow for the reclamation of cultivable land, both because of the technological limitations of the time and the extension of mountainous or hilly terrain, but also because of the obstructionism of the *latifundistas*, who were interested in protecting the rent positions they had achieved. Thus, the productive gap between North and South began to widen. In the rural South, moreover, small landowners were oppressed by unfavourable taxation, which prevented the accumulation of capital that in the North had given rise to rationalised and productive businesses. A further attempt to improve agricultural productivity in the South was made by the Giolitti governments through special laws for reclamation and irrigation works, without however achieving that character of lasting planning that could have given greater strength to the intervention (Farolfi, Fornasari, p. 24). The lasting planning was also lacking in the special 1904 law for Naples being developed by Giovanni Giolitti himself, for the preparation of which Francesco Saverio Nitti was called upon to advise on, as a southern economist. Nitti intended to indirectly involve the entire surrounding territory of Naples, to break national legislative uniformity in favour of specialised solutions for a particular area of the kingdom. Naples was understood by Nitti as a dress rehearsal to create the basis for an industrial development of the South, through the control of public water aimed at irrigating the land and producing cheap hydroelectric energy (Bevilacqua, 1991). The 1904 law established the *Ente Autonomo Volturno* (EAV), the first example of a public body independent of the central government and operating in the market, with the aim of creating hydroelectric power plants useful for the distribution of low-cost energy (Grieco, 2021). In addition, the same law was intended to address the chronic sanitation problems of a city congested with very high population density and subject to widespread poverty. The 1904 law represented a vast urban renewal project, including the demolition of unhealthy buildings and the construction of new housing, which was entrusted to the EAV and the *Istituto Case Popolari* (Barbagallo, 1984).

The basis for the special law of 1904 can also be found in Nitti’s political action as Minister of Agriculture, Industry and Trade (1911–1914) and later as Prime Minister (1919–1920): he sought to encourage the emergence of industries in the South, exploiting local natural resources such as water, to produce hydroelectric power, and promoting public investment to stimulate private

initiative. This programme also imposed water resource management and reforestation in areas such as Sardinia and Calabria, focusing on building hydraulic infrastructure to prevent flooding and improve the agricultural capacity of the land through reclamation as well as stimulating industrial initiatives through tax breaks, subsidies, and provision of cheap electricity (Barbagallo, 2017). However, the wider context was not propitious: the outbreak of World War I and the severe crisis that followed limited the capacity for localised initiatives in particular areas of the country, and the inability to manage social tensions caused the fall of the Nitti government in May 1920. Propaganda aside, little was achieved even during the twenty-year fascist period. Despite efforts to emphasise the rural character of the regime, some interventions in agrarian policy, such as the ‘wheat battle’ and the ‘integral land reclamation’ (Sollai, 2023), were unsuccessful, and for cereal cultivation, the effects of the 1887 tariffs were the same, sacrificing crops traditionally destined for export without producing any mechanisation of agriculture in southern Italy.

This article explores the modernisation of the rural Mezzogiorno between 1950 and 1962, focusing on the role of the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno, a public body created to address the socio-economic divide between northern and southern Italy. Taking into consideration the historical debate that matured within classical southernism and the increased focus on economic action to reduce the gap between the two Italian macro-regions of neo-southernism, which will be discussed in the next section, this study examines how the ‘agrarian question’ intersected with the broader ‘southern question’, reflecting the persistent economic disparities within Italy. Analysing the early stages (1950–1962) of the extraordinary intervention, the article shows that modernisation efforts were aimed not only at reducing regional imbalances but also at addressing structural deficiencies that hampered agricultural productivity. This article utilises primary material from the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno present in the digital archive resulting from the ASET Project (Archives of Economic and Territorial Development), which aims to safeguard, inventory, and promote the entire archival and bibliographic heritage of the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno/Agensud and, in a comparative manner, the sources in the historical archives of ENEL, the entity that managed the production and supply of electricity in Italy, created by the state in 1962.

Section 1. Meridionalism, neo-meridionalism, and the agrarian question

The ‘southern question’ has been one of the most debated topics in Italian political and academic history for the last 140 years. Leading intellectuals and politicians of all ideological backgrounds have offered a wide range of interpretations of the historical origins of the economic-social problems of southern Italy, from the Middle Ages to the present (Russo, 1955; Galasso, 1965; Daniele, Malanima, 2011). The debate was especially strong in the last decades of the nineteenth century and from 1945 to the 1980s. As such, it is customary to distinguish historical southernism from neo-southernism, with an interlude in the twenty-year Fascist period, during which the ‘southern question’ was silenced to avoid exposing historical problems of economic backwardness to the world or foment internal debate. The fascist government also banned emigration, effectively blocking the population flow that alleviated the ‘land hunger’ chronic in the Mezzogiorno, and also confiscated emigrants’ remittances, which for entire families represented an extremely important source of income. From the end of the nineteenth century, Southern Italy experienced an unprecedented phenomenon of mass emigration. Millions of southerners left their lands in search of better opportunities in America and Northern Europe. This exodus had profound demographic, economic, and cultural implications, altering the social fabric of rural communities and influencing family and gender dynamics (Bevilacqua, 1993; Cipolla, 2009).

Intellectuals such as Giustino Fortunato, Pasquale Villari, Antonio De Viti De Marco, Guido Dorso, and Francesco Saverio Nitti belonged to the first generation of meridionalists, those who identified the existence of a ‘southern question’ in the phase following the Risorgimento (1870–1922). They did not constitute a monolithic intellectual bloc since there were divergences,

ideological and programmatic. Giustino Fortunato, for example, took an analytical and often pessimistic approach, emphasising the deep historical roots of southern problems (Villari, 1988; Salvemini, 1955; Bevilacqua, 1993). Fortunato's thesis, which attributes the gap between North and South to historical factors linked to the different evolution of economic and social structures, is among the most convincing in the history of southernist thought.

Like Fortunato, Villari, De Viti De Marco, Dorso, and Nitti also pointed their finger at the resilience of the feudal economic system, based on the latifundium and low productivity of the land (Villari, 1875; Dorso, 1925), although they rejected Fortunato's fatalism and his deterministic conception of the gap between North and South Italy. Francesco Saverio Nitti took the debate in a new direction, being among the first to argue that the industrialisation of southern Italy would benefit the national economy by stimulating the demand for goods and services. Furthermore, he emphasised the importance of technical education, taking the German model into account, as the key to economic progress in southern Italy (Barbagallo, 1984). He anticipated the idea of European cooperation as a means to ensure peace and economic development, recognising the interdependence between nations. In addition to undertaking both theoretical reflection and political action, Nitti was a teacher for a new generation of southernists. His first pupil was Alberto Beneduce, later the founder of public bodies for intervention in the economy, especially during fascism. He was very attached to a 'technocratic socialism', with a strong sense of the state, and, therefore, far removed from the fascist ideology to the extent that, despite his leading role in the fascist movement, he was repeatedly subjected to the control of the secret political police, the OVRA (Franzini, 2020). Nitti's influence on Beneduce's work can be traced to the structure of the bodies created, as in the case of the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction: a few highly specialised employees, tending to be apolitical but with a strong sense of responsibility towards the state.

Beneduce's career was a fundamental link between classic and neo-meridionalism. Beneduce's last IRI (Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale), issued in the late 1930s, was dedicated to the economic-financial issues of southern Italy (Cringoli, 2019), and in this context, there was a renewed interest in the South, albeit unofficial due to the regime's veto on the southern question. Beneduce did not train southernist intellectuals in the traditional sense, but his vision of public intervention in the economy and the creation of solid financial institutions influenced a generation of economists and politicians who dealt with the development of the Mezzogiorno, namely, the neo-meridionalists: Donato Menichella, Francesco Giordani, and Pasquale Saraceno, together with Nino Novacco and the socialist Rodolfo Morandi, first of the Svimez (the company that promoted the creation of CasMez) and, finally, of the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno. Menichella, who among the neo-meridionalists was the one who had the most direct relationship with Beneduce in the IRI, can be considered the true founder of neo-meridionalism, as well as of extraordinary practical interventions. As Saraceno wrote: 'The law that, by instituting extraordinary intervention in 1950, gave life to a new southern policy, is essentially the work of Donato Menichella. The text was drafted in his office as governor of the Bank of Italy with the assistance of Francesco Giordani, who had been president of IRI at the time Menichella was its director'.

Neo-meridionalist thought, rather than investigating the historical causes of the South's economic backwardness, sought a way to reduce the gap. This was because it was made up of exponents of that section of economics, which, established in the shadow of Beneduce, looked technically at problem-solving. Neo-meridionalism attributed a fundamental role to the state in promoting the economic development of the Mezzogiorno (Galasso, 2011). It was argued that the market alone could not overcome the deep regional disparities. The state therefore had to intervene through targeted economic policies, public investments, and strategic planning. Neo-meridionalism advocated the need for economic planning at the national and regional levels (Saraceno, 1990). Through planning, the state could coordinate investments, allocate resources efficiently, and ensure that development policies were coherent and integrated. Svimez, founded

in 1946, was the institution in which these Southern-related theories of development matured. Neo-meridionalists were well aware that the modernisation of the rural Mezzogiorno, and consequently, the solution to the agrarian question, was the basis for launching a development programme that could permanently alleviate the suffering of the population. Rossi-Doria in particular believed that the underdevelopment of the South was closely linked to backward agrarian structures, characterised by unproductive latifundia and a scarce presence of small peasant property. He argued that profound agrarian reform was needed to redistribute land and promote the development of modern agriculture. With his scientific and analytical approach to the problem, Rossi-Doria also emphasised the importance of integrating agriculture with other economic sectors, promoting industrialisation and diversification of production (Bernardi, 2010). On this basis, the 'first half' of the 'Extraordinary Intervention' (1950–1962) focused on bridging the agricultural and infrastructural gap between the two areas of the country (Figure 1).

Section 2. The Cassa per il Mezzogiorno and the modernisation of rural Southern Italy

The promoters of the extraordinary intervention worked to prepare a territorial and productive redevelopment, linking on a political level to the attempt to modify property relations promoted by the recent agrarian reforms.² But there were additional agendas: the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno (hereafter CasMez), the public body created to implement these plans, was also a laboratory for the application of Keynesian policies in Italy (Saraceno, 1976), between an initial growth phase of demand stimulus and a subsequent phase dedicated to industrialisation, inspired by Rosenstein-Rodan's Big Push theory (Smith, 2015; Alacevich, 2021; Murphy, Shleifer, Vishny, 1989). Lepore has defined the basic theory of extraordinary intervention as supply-side Keynesianism, which underpinned CasMez's actions during its most expansive phase, coinciding with the Golden Age years (1950–1973) (Crafts, 1995): the policies adopted were not only aimed at stimulating aggregate demand but also at creating the infrastructure necessary to sustain planned and sustainable economic growth (Lepore, 2013). These interventions included building roads, reclaiming agricultural land, creating industrial clusters, and improving the education and technical training of the workforce. The inspiration for this activity was the TVA, established in 1933 to solve the structural problems of one of the poorest areas of the United States during a critical phase of the Great Depression (Kline, Moretti, 2014). CasMez took the same theoretical basis as the TVA (Lepore, 2013) and shared as an objective the breaking of the isolation of the most depressed inland areas and the modernisation of agricultural production. The first structured twelve-year plan supported the modernisation of agricultural productivity in the Mezzogiorno, including through the electrification of inland rural areas. On the administrative side, in the first twenty-five years of its activity, CasMez, like the TVA, enjoyed substantial autonomy from central government, and, on the strength of this independence, CasMez's managers and technicians scrutinised every project that came from the peripheral organisations of extraordinary intervention. The institution was closely linked to the central government, which guided its strategic objectives and guaranteed its funding. At the head of the structure was the President, a high-profile technical or economic figure appointed by the government, with the task of coordinating the Cassa's activities and representing it institutionally. The president was supported by the board of directors, a decision-making body composed of experts in disciplines such as engineering, economics, agronomy, and town planning. The Board was responsible for defining strategic guidelines, approving projects, and monitoring the progress of works.

A central role in CasMez's operation was played by the technical offices, composed of specialised professionals who were responsible for the design and implementation of the interventions, providing technical assistance to the local authorities and verifying the technical and financial suitability of the proposals. Projects were implemented through a structured process: initially, the needs of the area were identified through technical studies and socio-economic

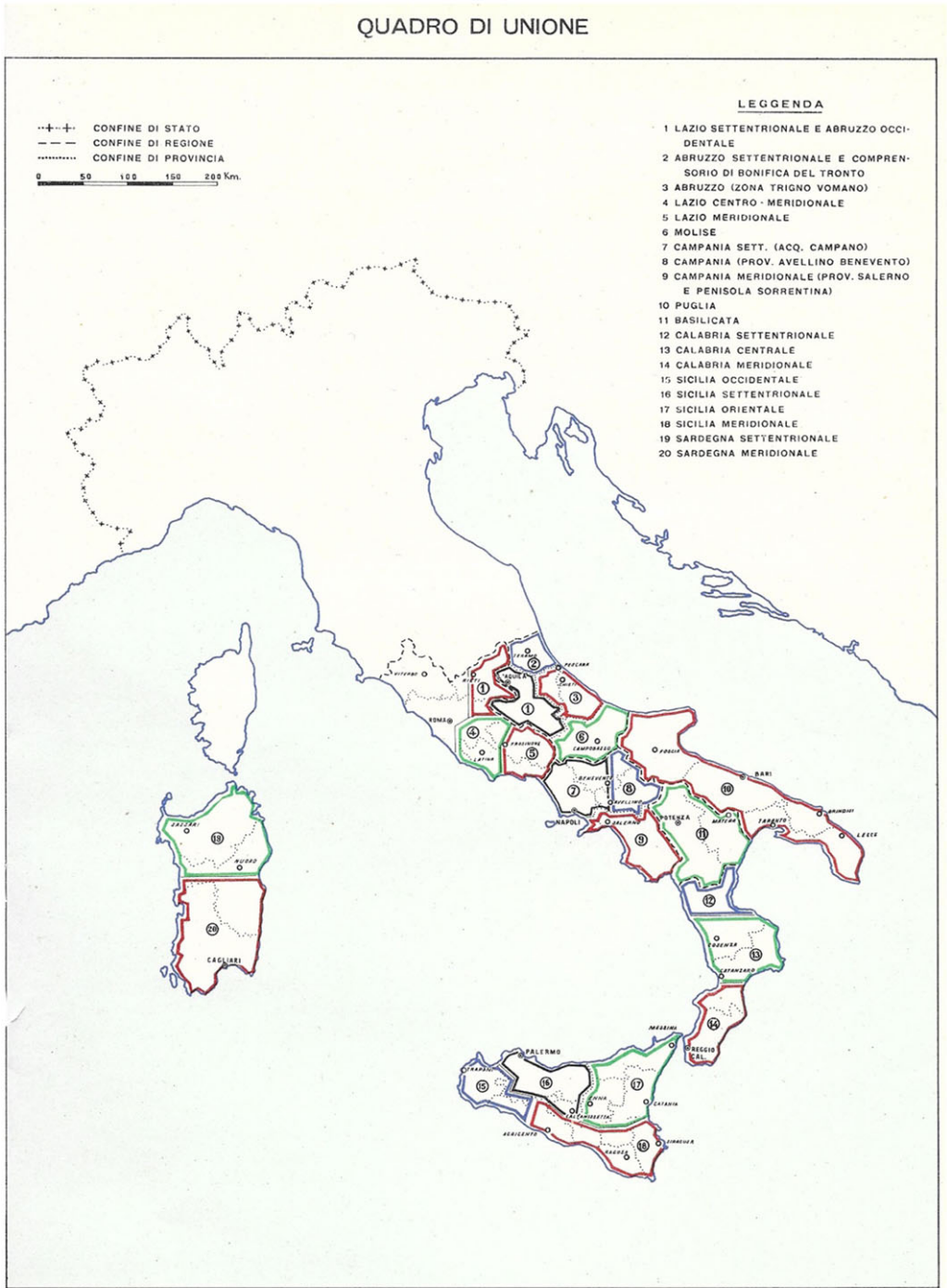


Figure 1. The territory concerned by the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno's intervention (divisions by agricultural reclamation basins).

Source: CasMez (1955). *La Cassa per il Mezzogiorno. Il primo quinquennio (1950-1955)*. Istituto Poligrafico di Stato.

analyses, on the basis of which multi-year plans were drawn up. The project proposals were assessed by the board of directors, which verified their technical, economic, and temporal sustainability. Once approved, the projects moved on to the execution phase, with work being entrusted to private companies, selected through public tenders. During this phase, the technical offices monitored the progress of the works to ensure that they were on schedule and met the required quality standards. The financing of CasMez's activities came mainly from the state budget, supplemented by international loans. Funds were distributed according to the priorities established in the strategic plans, with centralised management leaving little room for local autonomy. CasMez also operated as a link between the central government and local administrations, such as municipalities, reclamation consortia, and industrialisation areas and cores. However, operational and strategic control remained highly centralised, reducing the role of local institutions to mere executors of central directives, at least until the creation of regional administrations in the early 1970s.³

In fact, CasMez's archives reveal a capillary control of its top management over each local initiative; this control was made possible by the mobilisation of a conspicuous number of technicians, who assessed the feasibility of projects after in-depth studies. One of the results of this was that CasMez was transformed into a highly qualified technical body, as well as a training ground for professional categories of various kinds (engineers, surveyors, agronomists, geologists, geographers, etc.). The minutes of the CasMez board of directors reveals the broad strategic direction to which the organisation was committed and there was a resulting general absence of debate on strategy and a focus on the technical features of projects over theoretical issues. Moreover, as the archival record shows, in the first seven years, the vast majority of interventions approved concerned problems relating to agriculture and infrastructure: land reclamation, roads, aqueducts, bridges, railways – anything that could break the isolation of the inland areas of southern Italy and connect them first with the urban areas of the south, such as the coastal areas of Campania and Puglia, and then with the rest of the country.⁴

The co-presence of Rosenstein-Rodan at the top of both the World Bank and Svimez demonstrates two fundamental elements of the Italian State's extraordinary intervention in the South: first, that the Mezzogiorno was part of a prospective international strategy, hypothesised by the World Bank to resolve socio-economic imbalances in particular areas of the world, as the South-Eastern area of Mediterranean Sea. As Lepore shows, the World Bank actively participated in the effort to modernise the rural Mezzogiorno through loans to the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno (Lepore, 2023). Second, partial and sporadic interventions to support the economy were rejected as isolated investment initiatives were not sufficient to overcome structural obstacles and trigger a virtuous cycle of economic growth. Thus, central planning, resource mobilisation (domestic financing and international loans) and inter-sectoral support were taken up by the Big Push theory and implemented by CasMez to support an initial modernisation of the rural Mezzogiorno through investments in land infrastructure, to create a springboard for the subsequent launch of the land industrialisation policy.

The foundation of the Cassa del Mezzogiorno took place in 1950, a crucial year when the national reconstruction programme, supported by Marshall Plan funds, was already in full swing (Pescatore, 2008; Lepore, 2013). The birth of a new institution dedicated to the development of the best productive forces in southern Italy was linked politically to the Sila land law and the agrarian extirpation law for Campania, the Maremma, the Po basin, and the Fucino territories. This was aimed at completing a programme of agricultural property settlement, which had begun with the Christian Democrat governments after the 1948 elections, intended to solve the historical problems arising from the predominance of latifundium in the rural areas of the territory. Moreover, the foundation of CasMez consolidated the planning carried out in the three-year period 1948–1950 by Italian and American technicians towards supporting southern agricultural productivity through land reclamation programmes, the result of the collaboration between the Svimez, the technicians of the European Recovery Program (ERP) plan, the Bank of Italy, and the

Ministry of Agriculture (Raftopoulos, 2009; Bernardi, 2015). The origins of the CasMez experience were therefore partially dictated by American demands, eager to accelerate the effects of the Marshall Plan for geopolitical reasons and address the problem of unemployment and underemployment of the peasant masses in the south (Bernardi, p. 338). The productive sector in which the Marshall Plan had the greatest influence in southern Italy was agriculture. Marshall Plan aid was used to build basic infrastructure in Southern Italy, including land reclamation and irrigation projects. Aid was also used to promote the purchase of fertilisers and agricultural machinery and to improve agricultural production, contributing to an increase in productivity.

Although these measures had a positive impact on some areas, they failed to radically transform the economy of the South, which continued to suffer from emigration and underdevelopment. Moreover, the unequal distribution of aid between the North and the South partly widened the gap: the primary intention of the ERP was to revive industrial productivity, and considering that the most industrialised area of the country was the North, most of the interventions were allocated to that part of Italy (Villari, 1988). As described by Pescosolido, the effectiveness of the Marshall Plan in Southern Italy was limited, underlining how the ineffective management of aid and the absence of an industrial strategy reduced the impact of investment on the long-term development of the Mezzogiorno (Pescosolido, 2017). In 1950–1951, the gross saleable production per hectare of agricultural land in the North was 154,000 lire, while in the South, it was 91,000 lire. Greater disparity still was found in the modernisation and mechanisation of rural labour: the number of tractors per thousand hectares of land was 7.6 in the North compared to a modest 1.6 in the South; the use of fertilisers per kg/ha in the South was less than half that of the Centre-North.⁵ In 1950, the rural population of the South was very dense; its activity consisted mainly of the exploitation of cereal crops and the cultivation of fruit trees. Rossi-Doria, a leading economist reconsidering the southern ‘agrarian question’, spoke of ‘pulp and bone’, distinguishing areas of high agricultural productivity, the ‘pulp’, that is, the plains, and areas unattractive to rationalised agricultural settlements, the ‘bone’, that is, the inland areas (Rossi-Doria, 2005). This highlighted an initial triple gap in the South. There were, on the one hand, the few plains that were productive and connected to areas of industrial processing of agricultural products, as well as close to the few urbanised areas of the South, and on the other hand, the ‘bone’, lagging far behind both the more advanced areas of the South and the rest of the peninsula; finally, there was a gap between the country system and the rest of the western countries of Europe such as France and England, which at the time represented the centre of the economic system of the old continent (Cringoli, 2023).

International influences were also felt when the second half of CasMez was officially inaugurated in 1957. That year, the Treaty of Rome was signed, a fundamental step in the process of building an economically united Europe. Like Italy, other European countries experienced trajectories of regional imbalances, as industrialisation tended to be located in areas that were convenient in terms of energy, infrastructure, and demand for goods. The ‘transport revolution’ from the nineteenth century created synergies between centres and peripheries, and in most cases, geography and resource scarcity accentuated the divide. Besides Italy, the countries with significant territorial gaps were Spain, Finland, Greece, Yugoslavia, the United Kingdom, and Ireland. Except for Spain, these nations participated in World War II, resulting in disastrous human and productivity losses for Greece and Yugoslavia, although less so for Finland. From the 1950s onwards, these nations experienced a development trajectory similar to other Western nations, taking advantage of the positive Golden Age trend and partially or fully catching up on their territorial gaps. International monetary stability and the application of Keynesian-style economic policies benefited these territories. Fundamental was the contribution of the public sector, both industrial and tertiary, since unlike a market left unconstrained, the state was able to allocate resources in proportion to the population (Viesti and Prota, 2012).

Two case studies of other nations facing regional imbalances and government responses can be usefully outlined here: Scotland and Ireland. The gap between the centre of the British economic

system and the Scottish Highlands deserves a more in-depth comparative discussion, as it had its origins in the long-running Scottish agrarian question and the state attempted to make up the gap by establishing public agencies, in a way similar to the case of Southern Italy. Industrialisation, which began in Britain in the eighteenth century, had a major impact on the economies of the different regions. London, the Midlands, and the north of England benefited from the emergence of heavy industry, textile manufacturing, and, later, the chemical and automobile industries. These areas saw the growth of an urban working class and a sharp increase in GDP per capita. In contrast, the Scottish Highlands, characterised by a predominance of agriculture and animal husbandry, remained relatively isolated from industrial developments for much longer. The region suffered heavy depopulation due to the Highland Clearances and their aftermath, a series of forced dispossessions that led to the rural population emigrating to the cities or abroad, mainly to North America and Australia (Richards, 2016). The history of the economic divide in the United Kingdom is also linked to state intervention. After World War II, the British government introduced policies to reduce regional disparities, but with mixed results. The Highlands benefited from some specific interventions, such as the creation of the Highlands and Islands Development Board (1965), which aimed to stimulate economic development in the poorer areas of Scotland (Devine, 2001). However, these initiatives often failed to compensate for the lack of significant infrastructure investment and the demographic decline that continued to affect the region. The neo-liberal policies adopted in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher's government further accentuated regional inequalities, as economic deregulation favoured already wealthy areas at the expense of rural or formerly industrial regions. Ireland saw a similar regional divide, specifically between the West and the richer, more urbanised East. After the Great Famine of 1845–1852, the West of Ireland suffered a drastic demographic decline due to high mortality rates and mass emigration. This region, heavily dependent on subsistence farming, was particularly hard hit compared to the more economically diversified eastern areas. The lack of economic opportunities led to continued migration to eastern cities and abroad, further impoverishing the western region (O'Grada, 1995). The geography of the West of Ireland, characterised by mountainous terrain and less fertile soils, limited intensive agricultural and industrial development. In addition, the distance from the main European trade routes and the lack of transport infrastructure hindered access to domestic and international markets. During the twentieth century, national economic policies favoured the development of eastern urban areas, particularly Dublin, which attracted most of the industrial investment and infrastructure. An export-oriented industrialisation strategy focused on regions with access to major ports and a more skilled workforce, leaving the West in a continued marginal position (O'Grada, 1994). With the accession to the European Union in 1973, Ireland began to benefit from structural funds for regional cohesion. However, the distribution of these funds failed to compensate for existing disparities. Most investments were directed towards already developed areas, further enhancing the economic attractiveness of the east and south of the country (O'Hagan, Newman, 2014). Although these were comparable experiences, in terms of the problems, responses, and results, no gap within European states matched that of Italy, primarily because it affected a very large territory covering more than a third of the nation, and millions of citizens.

Land hunger was an endemic characteristic of the agrarian question in Southern Italy and one of the causes of the low productivity of the land, as fertile areas were congested (Mori, 1992). The concept of 'natural poverty' in the Mezzogiorno derived from the liberal approach of Giustino Fortunato's meridionalist thought, which considered the disproportion between population and land as the basis of the Mezzogiorno's backwardness. Rossi-Doria, who developed an analysis on the backwardness of the South by amalgamating the different schools of Southernist thought, decoupled the concept of 'natural poverty' from Fortunato's pessimism (Graziani, 2020): he noted that this disproportion was loosened by migratory outflows from the 1880s onwards, when the ratio of people to land in the South was rebalanced and migrants' remittances allowed for limited income formation. However, Rossi-Doria identified an exacerbation of the quantitative problem

of the Mezzogiorno's population in the migratory blockade policies imposed by the fascist regime (D'Amico, Patti, 2018), which obstructed the natural poverty outlet for propaganda purposes and to emphasise the agrarian nature of fascism, which had been the armed arm of landowners against the demands of the labourers and sharecroppers. As a solution, Rossi-Doria considered necessary, albeit painful, a resumption of the exodus from the South to rebalance the relationship between population and land (Graziani, 2020, p. 482).

Aware of these debates, the CasMez's managers allocated the first investments to integral reclamation activities for the adjustment of mountain basins, to hydraulic-forestry and hydraulic-agricultural interventions (CasMez, 1955), and then to equipping the land with infrastructure suitable for long-term planning. The aims set by the policy were precise to improve the rural landscape and then create fertile ground for the settlement of productive activities of other kinds, from trade to industry. Thus, in the first years of the CasMez's activity, 75% of the funds were committed to the agricultural sector with the establishment of reclamation districts, precisely identifying areas of intervention for the primary sector. From the provinces of Ascoli to Ragusa, passing through Sardinia, 112 reclamation districts were created, mainly touching on the Apennine areas, and 235 perimeters of mountain or coastal reforestation, covering about 16 million ha (CasMez, 1955, p. 31). Part of these interventions included the reorganisation of past programmes that had never been completed or had been carried out in an inappropriate manner. A breakdown of the data shows that most of the reclamation work in the CasMez's first period was carried out in Sardinia (24.3% of the total); in Calabria, on the other hand, more funds were allocated to the 'mountain reclamation' category (33.7%) and to 'mountain and coastal basins' (29.5%).⁶ On the whole, from 1950 to 1955, CasMez spent 2.73% of the total on studies and research, 7.25% on mountain district drainage, 30.65% on hydraulic systems, and 34.15% on irrigation works, while on 'road and civil works', which allowed for the modernisation of the whole of Southern society, the institution spent 25.22% of the funding.⁷

'Mountain reclamation' was very important to the overall purposes of all the CasMez's intervention in agriculture. It was necessary to create stable support for the population living in the more peripheral and less connected areas of the south, which were difficult to inhabit both climatically and economically. In addition, mountainous settlement was a key goal, seen as vital to support intensive agriculture in the reclamation areas. In a short time, measures were implemented to prevent hydrogeological instability and to regulate the flow of mountain waters; local agricultural activities were financed and, above all, the references expressed in Law No. 991 of 25 July 1952, which included favourable measures for mountain territories, were put into practice.⁸ This law was part of the parliamentary regulatory activity in the framework of the definition of extraordinary intervention measures. A Central Census Commission was established, with the task of compiling a list of municipalities falling into the mountain category. Interested local authorities could apply for inclusion in the list or were automatically included in it by the Commission itself. To make everything more efficient, the Central Commission was flanked by Provincial Commissions, which studied the territories from a hydrogeological and socio-economic point of view.⁹ As part of the concessions, the legislature established the possibility of using improvement loans granted by agricultural credit institutions in favour of direct cultivators, small and medium-sized owners, livestock breeders, and artisans in mountain municipalities.

This approach exposed a tension between immediate production needs and long-term socio-economic transformations: subsidised loans represented an attempt to facilitate private investment in key sectors such as agriculture, animal husbandry, and raw material processing. However, the real innovation was the state guarantee on losses, which shifted part of the risk from individuals to public institutions. This intervention model reflected a risk redistribution-oriented vision, but not necessarily combined with an accompanying strategy to strengthen local entrepreneurial capacity. With the establishment of twenty-five consortia and a multi-year financial plan, mountain reclamation highlighted the ambition to transform the territory through systematic interventions. The allocation of funds, which initially stood at 4 billion lire for

1952–1953 and later increased to 7 billion annually, was part of a broader framework of extraordinary intervention for rural areas that mobilised over 887 billion lire.¹⁰ The size of the resources was such that these funds translated into a partial structural change: the increases in productivity, amounting to 7,000 lire per hectare, and the increase in employment, 25,000 new jobs, were significant in absolute terms, even if they did not stop the flow of migration to other areas of Italy and industrialised Europe.

In addition to mountain reclamation, the irrigation programme emerged as the focus of extraordinary intervention, both for its strategic importance and for the technical difficulties it posed. Water scarcity, identified as the main obstacle to the creation of intensive agriculture, was addressed through the construction of reservoirs and irrigation complexes on a regional scale. These interventions not only responded to practical needs but reflected a productivist conception that aimed to maximise the agricultural potential of the areas concerned. As can be seen from the reports published by CasMez technicians, this type of work was central to the structure of the twelve-year plan 1950–1962 (CasMez, 1955, pp. 43–44). During the first phase of the extraordinary intervention, collective irrigations were put into operation over an area of 61,801 hectares, in addition to privately financed works. In order to organise the intervention, forty-eight irrigation complexes were identified throughout southern Italy (Pescatore, 1959), although the implementation of the plan highlighted a critical dependence on external technical expertise, such as that of engineers and agronomists, which risked reducing the autonomy of local communities in adapting the works to their own needs.

On the infrastructure front, the improvement of the water and road network was crucial for integrating the South into the national economic system. The priority given to the construction of aqueducts and the improvement of the sewerage network, with a total allocation of around 200 billion lire,¹¹ reflected the urgent need to tackle sanitation problems that were penalising productivity and the quality of life. The direct involvement of the Cassa Depositi e Prestiti in the financing of the most complex works highlighted the need to resort to more substantial funds in order to quickly build infrastructures that were fundamental for the population. The improvement of the road network, with the construction of more than 2,600 km of new roads, was one of the most tangible successes of the plan. The percentage of asphalted provincial roads in the South increased significantly, from an initial 13.61% to 65% already by 1955, up to 90% in 1960 (CasMez, 1960). In addition to carriage roads, the road network was also improved in rail transport; 75 billion lire was spent on the upgrading of several lines connecting Southern Italy until 1955 (Rindone, 2015). This intervention not only facilitated the mobility of goods and people but also stimulated sectors such as tourism, especially in regions like Campania and Sicily (Cassar, Creaco, 2012). Above all, the consequentiality of CasMez's phases of activity emerges in this context: the infrastructural improvement, although necessary, was not sufficient in itself to bridge the economic gap between North and South but was fundamental to launching the next phase of the extraordinary intervention, where the industrialisation of Southern Italy was aimed at in decisive terms. All this had an extraordinary significance for the inhabitants of the areas concerned. The arrival of certain aspects of modernity in the twentieth century changed the face of rural landscapes that had stood still for centuries. In addition, new communication routes allowed for greater mechanisation of agriculture and brought the consumer market closer to the producers.

As underlined by the accounts of the first five years of the CasMez's work, the founding purpose envisaged the 'economic and social progress of the Mezzogiorno',¹² including 'the general development of the Mezzogiorno [...] [and of] the process of industrialisation of the Mezzogiorno'.¹³ In 1952, the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno launched an accelerated programme of industrialisation for the South in order to narrow the gap with the rest of the country. This industrial programme was based on a theoretical line that indicated the promotion of an industrial take-off to integrate the process of socio-economic development originated by the first interventions of the institution (Palermo, 2019). However, industrialisation of the southern part of

the peninsula did not begin until 1957, with the establishment of industrialisation areas and cores. Despite this, the emergence of the electrification programme and the initial promotion of a food processing industry also indirectly facilitated the progression of an agriculture aimed at marketing the final product, linking agricultural and industrial areas more closely.

To finance the creation of small and medium-sized industrial plants, CasMez invested for about a year (1952–1953) exclusively in loan funds from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the future World Bank. Starting in 1953, the Italian state reorganised the structure of medium-sized credit. CasMez injected 40% into each of the endowment funds of the three medium-sized credit institutions identified to support the industrialisation of the Mezzogiorno: Isveimer (Institute for the Economic Development of Southern Italy), Irfis (Regional Institute for Financing Industries in Sicily), and Cis (Sardinian Industrial Credit) (Lepore and Palermo, 2015). The targeted sectors for the institution's financial forces were agricultural processing products, small and medium-sized enterprise plants, and large industrial plants related to the energy sector. In the first phase of the CasMez's activities, 303 projects were already in the pipeline for plants for processing agricultural products, of which about half were in operation after an investment of 4,041 million lire, creating work for hundreds of workers. New grain mills, milk plants, and fruit and vegetable plants were created. By 1955, there were 254 projects for small and medium-sized industries, of which 87 had already been implemented, with a total planned expenditure of 46 billion lire, employing 15,855 people. With the support of the banks of Isveimer, Irfis, and Cis, sugar refineries, wool and cotton mills, and other companies dedicated to the processing of products deriving from agricultural activity were also built.

This new Mezzogiorno support body generated a real revolutionary breakthrough for the inhabitants of the region from a social, economic, and cultural point of view. What was planned and built after the first phase of intervention led to a further improvement in the situation of rural Southern Italy; in fact, most of the projects that had been put into the pipeline were completed, other programmes came into being, and, above all, investments were concentrated on strategic sectors that could make up for the country's lack of energy resources, such as the electro-commercial sector. Originally, the 'electricity question' was not part of the main programmes. If until 1952 the SME, Società Meridionale di Elettricità, relied on Isveimer to finance its activities,¹⁴ from 1953 onwards, the CasMez's intervention methods changed structurally: as already mentioned, parliament authorised the Cassa to participate in the initiatives of the special medium-term credit institutions, Isveimer, Irfis, and Cis. In the meantime – and this is one of the decisive elements in understanding the activities of the institution in its early years – the first loan with the IBRD-World Bank was signed on 10 October 1951. In summary, this aspect of CasMez's activities was a great success, as for the first time, the foundations were laid for the two areas of the country, North and South, to grow together, transforming divergence into convergence for at least two decades (1953–1973).

Conclusions

From a quantitative point of view, CasMez drove the growth rate of Southern agriculture to increase by 0.1% over that of the central-northern area, reaching 2.7% from 1950 to 1962. This may seem a relatively insignificant result, but considering the starting level of productivity in the rural South at the end of the Second World War, it was measurable progress. In the final analysis, it is useful to offer a comparative reading of the data compiled by the contemporaries of the extraordinary intervention and those revised over the longer term relating to direct interventions. In the first twelve years, the direct action and pre-industrialisation phase, the resources deployed by CasMez were rather low. Despite this, this period is regarded in the historiography as the period of greatest infrastructural success.¹⁵ Reviewing the archive data for the period, a change in the

profile of the extraordinary intervention towards greater support for industrialisation was about to take place. The contradiction between the funds allocated and the success of CasMez's direct action should be read both in the general process of convergence between North and South in the 1950s and 1970s and in terms of the purpose of the funds. Beyond the Harrod-Domar model, which had been fundamental in the theoretical elaboration of the industrialisation project proposed from the outset by Saraceno (president of CasMez) insofar as it advocated increased productivity as a source of job creation and development, once the quantity, albeit minimal, of funds to be invested in certain activities had been established, it was not the size of the allocations that counted, but the purpose of their use. This clarifies the relationship between the success of the first twelve years of CasMez's activities and the paucity of resources.

The rate of growth in agricultural productivity, however, was not enough to rid the South of its historical backwardness, according to some Southernists and economists of the period. Rossi-Doria expressed this view in the early 1950s when CasMez was implementing its first measures. He considered the infrastructural and modernising work of the extraordinary intervention to be fundamental for the advancement of the South, but although he was an agrarian economist and one of the consultants on land reform measures, he considered any action for the sole benefit of agriculture to be limited because, in his opinion, those sectoral interventions could do nothing without a true industrialisation policy (Graziani, 2020, p. 494). Later, Rossi-Doria emphasised this position in the most expansive phase of the 'Italian economic boom' (1955–1963), as he believed that development had brought the North to an accelerated rate of growth thanks to the international context, while for the Southerners, the historical hunger for land made them frame 'progress' as being able to seek work elsewhere, initiating a new mass migration towards the North and Europe. According to Rossi-Doria – as recalled by Graziani (Graziani, 2020, p. 494) – at that juncture the Republic's executives could have finally launched a policy of widespread industrialisation in the South, not limited to a few centres linked to heavy industry. In 1972, Rossi-Doria had in fact hypothesised the birth of a sort of mixed paradigm for the South, in order to avoid the uprooting of the rural population: agriculture and industry needed to be more integrated, establishing a peaceful coexistence between the two sectors (Bernardi, 2013, p. 352). Instead, the end of the *Golden Age* brought about a profound change in the policy towards the South, replacing productivist instances due to stagflation, by trying to hold up Southern income through welfarist policies. The end of the extraordinary intervention coincided with a privatisation phase and the start of the progressive demobilisation of the system of state-owned enterprises – decisive in the industrialisation of the South – in partial response to Europe-wide political debate on the requirements for the future signing of the Maastricht Treaty. The clauses of the treaty provided for the absolute safeguarding of the principles of competition, upholding the prohibition of exclusive sectoral and territorial aid within the acceding states (Guarino, 2006; Baun, 2019).

The official conclusion of the Mezzogiorno's extraordinary *status* was established by Law No. 488 of 1992, which caused further damage to the South in subsequent years, as equated depressed areas and areas in decline, bringing into the category also areas of the Centre-North in difficulty. Moreover, the neo-liberal approaches of Maastricht, and the subsequent introduction of the single currency, have been counterproductive for Southern Italy and the 'European Mezzogiorno'. A unified, but extremely competitive free market, linked to the mobility of resources has increased the gaps between backward and industrialised areas, favouring the territories economically better equipped to withstand the new challenges of globalisation and, ultimately, the ongoing digital revolution. In the years following the conclusion of the extraordinary intervention, some basic inconsistencies re-emerged: Southern Italy was not in a position to make itself independently competitive with respect to public funding of various kinds (De Benedictis, 2008), and from the beginning of the age of crisis to the present day, what can be defined as the triple gap has grown again: the inland areas of the South have become further marginalised and subject to new depopulation, due to the unrewarding economic situation and the distance from service centres.

After the liquidation of CasMez, it was only in 2012 that the economist Fabrizio Barca tried to turn the attention back to the problem of the inland areas as strategic territories for the socio-economic development of the South and the country (Nisticò, 2019).

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Notes

- 1 State intervention that went beyond simple public intervention in the economy because it was localised and sectoralised, hereafter referred to as ‘extraordinary intervention’.
- 2 In 1950, during the De Gasperi government, the agrarian reform, known as the ‘stalcio’ reform, was promoted, which aimed to break up the latifundium in order to redistribute land mainly to farm labourers. The main objective, therefore, was the forced expropriation of land belonging to former latifundia in order to transform farm labourers into free smallholders.
- 3 The organisational structure of CasMez can be deduced from archival documents, specifically from the minutes of the boards of directors in the early years of the organisation’s existence; see Archivio dello Sviluppo Economico Territoriale-ASET (Territorial Economic Development Archive), Minutes Board CasMez, vols. 0001-0224, meetings 1-619, 1950–1961.
- 4 ASET, Minutes Board CasMez, vols. 0001-0224, meetings 1-619, 1950–1961.
- 5 ASET, Minutes Board CasMez, vols. 0004-0015, meetings 38-100, 1950–1951.
- 6 ASET, Minutes Board CasMez, vols. 0047-0057, meetings 330-358, 1956.
- 7 ASET, Minutes Board CasMez, vols. 0047-0057, meetings 330-358, 1956.
- 8 ASET, Minutes Board CasMez, vols. 0017, 0018, meetings 163-224, 1953–1954.
- 9 Law No. 991 of 25 July 1952, Title I.
- 10 ASET, Minutes Board CasMez, vol. 0026-0031, meetings 266-290, 1954; ASET, Minutes Board CasMez, vol. 0286-0310, meetings 695-710, 1963. ASET, Minutes Board CasMez, vol. 0017-0018, meetings 163-224, 1953.
- 11 ASET, Minutes Board CasMez, vol. 0017-0018, meetings 163-224, 1953.
- 12 Law instituting the Cassa per opere straordinarie di pubblico interesse nell’Italia meridionale of 10 August 1950, no. 646, supplemented by Law No. 949 of 25 July 1952.
- 13 Law No. 166 of 22 March 1952.
- 14 ENEL historical archives (ASEN), Naples section, Minutes Board Sme, pos. C1 I3 2C, minutes of 23 November 1951; ASEN, Palermo section, Minutes Board SGES, cart. no. 194, minutes of 26 April 1958; ASEN, Palermo section, Minutes Board SGES, cart. no. 194, minutes of 29 April 1960.
- 15 ASET, Minutes Board CasMez, vol. 0286-0310, meetings 695-710, 1963.

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