

**A Personal Memorial:**

## **Vittorio Santaniello: Founder of the International Consortium on Agricultural Biotechnology Research (ICABR)**

**Pasquale Lucio Scandizzo**

*University of Rome "Tor Vergata"*

**David Zilberman**

*University of California, Berkeley*

**Carl E. Pray**

*Rutgers University*

---

### **The Early Years**

The School of Agricultural Sciences at the University of Naples, where Vittorio Santaniello studied, was considered both prestigious and remote. It was located in Portici, a populous town south of Naples, in the Royal Palace (a summer house of the Bourbons in the 18th century), amidst a wondrous park and a splendid garden. In the 1950s, it was one of the few schools in the University that required rigorous attendance from students to virtually all classes. Vittorio was a conscientious student, and, at the same time, a great believer in the importance of the practice of "student life," a mixture of bohemian attitudes and worldly behavior. This made Vittorio an enjoyable companion but did not reduce his dedication to his studies and his determination to rapidly pursue academic achievements.

His way of dealing with life was always a mixture of joviality and humorous detachment, combined with concern and serious planning. He developed this strategy of behavior over the years, and the strategy worked because it reflected the natural inclination of a generous character—ready to help and vulnerable to disappointment, but also relentless and effective in overcoming hardships and obstacles. As most people from the South of Italy, he had a dramatic conception of friendship. For him "a friend in need was a friend indeed." Vittorio had developed profound, strong feelings toward some of us—a sentiment that we experienced directly throughout the many years in which we knew each other. This sentiment, however, was not exclusive, and we witnessed Vittorio's enlarged capacity to make friends and to cultivate new and old friendships with a unique mixture of generosity, solidarity, and human warmth.

It is difficult to accurately depict student life in Italy in the years of the economic boom (the "Italian miracle") in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. The University was still a place for the elites, but as the Italian

economy developed at great speed, it was becoming increasingly open to young people from an emerging lower-middle class. The University continued to adhere to much of the protocol established over the centuries, but many of the rules were being challenged. Legitimacy of the older ways was being eroded, while at the same time no convincing new model for teaching and learning appeared available, except perhaps the ones represented by the great institutions of learning in the Anglo-Saxon world. Even more than in England, which had been the object of desire for previous generation of students, it was the US universities that appeared to embody the promise of a new beginning. Vittorio was an ardent believer in the American system for graduate work and in the positive effects of a learning experience in the United States. At the time, students' attitudes toward the United States were tinted with ambiguities, but admiration and attraction were prevalent. The Kennedy administration, then just taking over the country, with its almost legendary mixture of grace and intellectual appeal, did much to reinforce these positive feelings.

Vittorio found his way to the United States almost immediately after he graduated in Agricultural Sciences from the University of Naples through the assistance of one of the major academic "Barons" of Agricultural Economics in Italy. With his help, Vittorio went to North Carolina State University. There, he rapidly earned a master's degree in Agricultural Economics, but was also involved in a serious car accident.

This first American experience was important for Vittorio's maturity as a young and promising scholar and gave him full access to the standard Italian academic track. He joined the prestigious Faculty of Economics at University of Rome "La Sapienza," first as an Assistant and then as an Associate Professor of Agricultural Economics, and he began enjoying the prospect of

a promising career in an exciting intellectual milieu. The formal learning dimension was not, however, the only effect of his American degree. The combination of his enthusiasm for the United States, and the exposure to a merit-based, pragmatic culture touched more profound chords of his character. His enduring enthusiasm for development economics, his command of cost-benefit analysis, and the experience working as a consultant with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), led to a position as economist at the InterAmerican Development Bank.

The few years he spent in Washington were momentous ones, as he tried to make the most of the American experience. At the same time, he was at a point of his family life cycle, where he wanted to be back to Italy. Vittorio's character and his dedication to work led to continuous planning for professional, political, and social change. In addition to working for the InterAmerican Development Bank, he also worked with Pasquale Scandizzo (at the World Bank at that time) on several issues. Some of these were technical in nature, involving measurements and academic papers, and some were more broadly professional in the realm of development projects planned for his return to Italy, where the political situation seemed both dramatic and full of promise.

Vittorio had a number of contacts in the socialist party and was often excited at reports and prospects for involvement from these sources. He had respect for political power and, at the same time, a belief in the problematic nature of power and the importance of being independent from it. Vittorio was indeed fascinated by power, especially in its most practical aspects deriving from the exercise of great authority. At the same time, however, he had a natural nonchalance, vis-à-vis personal power, and this made him almost indifferent to the suggestions of political persuasion and opportunism. It was perhaps for this reason that he never tried to be close to a politician or to sell his professional advice in the political arena in spite of his ideological closeness and, in some cases, even private acquaintance with the increasingly powerful socialist politicians in Italy.

### **University of Rome “Tor Vergata”**

Back in Italy at the beginning of the 1980s, Vittorio was involved with a group of friends in the foundation of the School of Economics in a new University of Rome at Tor Vergata. The School of Economics was founded by a very tight group, a brotherhood of academic professionals that shared a common interpretation of what the

University should be and also a specific project. Vittorio's dedication to this common cause was, from the beginning, complete. It was an opportunity to overcome the alienation that he had experienced in other situations, where the structure of power had seemed arbitrary and inconsistent with what the institution purported to be its mission. At Tor Vergata he had a chance to contribute to both the mission and the vision of the school, and his enthusiasm perhaps went even beyond the elation that we all felt as our plans and dreams gradually became true.

He contributed vastly to building the faculty, the graduate program, the teaching, and research standards. His relentless activity of designing new projects—he conceived and managed a successful two-year program of institutional advice and training for the University of Maputo in Mozambique—finally found a worthy challenge in the International Consortium for Agricultural Biotechnology Research (ICABR). It was the last frontier of Vittorio's commitment and achievements in institution building.

### **International Consortium for Agricultural Biotechnology Research (ICABR)**

The regulation and utilization of agricultural biotechnology has become a major cause of conflict between the European Union and the United States. This conflict spills over to the rest of the world, where the Latin American nations have adopted the US approach and African countries follow the pattern established by the European Union. Above all, Vittorio wanted the Ravello meetings and the consortium to provide a forum for exchange between scientists in the European Union, the United States, and developing countries so that more effective biotechnology policies would emerge. Vittorio Santaniello was crucial in establishing—in the midst of Europe—a sanctuary where new research findings and varying perspectives on the economics of agricultural biotechnology were presented and debated. The Ravello conference and the ICABR consortium that sponsored it have provided a forum for presenting new knowledge and international dialogue on the utilization of new biological knowledge in agriculture and natural resource systems.

This project started with a simple and tentative idea: to construct an international network of scholars around a highly controversial topic that was as yet almost neglected by the economists. Vittorio was enthusiastic, determined, and as he had demonstrated in many other cases, ready to put himself on the line to realize the proj-

ect. He had a sense of urgency about it, a feeling justified by the growth and establishment of the Ravello conference and the consortium itself.

The first conference had about 40 participants and was organized by Vittorio Santaniello, Bob Evenson, and Jerry Carlson in 1996 at the University of Rome “Tor Vergata,” on the economics of biotechnology. Vittorio and Bob Evenson envisioned an annual event in Italy; FAO, “Tor Vergata,” and the Yale Development Center co-sponsored the second event in 1997, which attracted close to 100 participants. At the end of this conference, the International Consortium of Agricultural Biotechnology Research was established, with Vittorio Santaniello, Bob Evenson, David Zilberman, and Bill Lesser on its board. It was agreed that the consortium would have an annual conference and would serve as an intellectual clearinghouse for knowledge about agricultural biotechnology. From the beginning, the board realized that the annual conference would not attract committed participants unless it combined knowledge with pleasure, and Vittorio was dedicated to expose the participants first to the best of Rome and then to the treasures of Italy. The second conference included an exclusive visit to Villa Borghese, a night tour of Rome, and unforgettable meals. The sessions were full of excitement and heated discussion and sometimes lasted much longer than planned. In one of the days, the discussion ended at about 8:30 pm (it was scheduled to end at 6 pm), which delayed dinner at one of Rome’s best restaurants. Dinner therefore did not begin until 10 pm, and the night tour around the Vatican did not begin until 12:30 am.

Rome has many charms, but traffic is not one of them, and the long trips from the hotels to the meeting facilities in “Tor Vergata” exhausted the participants. Finding a venue that would reduce the transportation hassle became a major priority, and then Vittorio raised the possibility of holding future meetings at Ravello. We did not know much about the place, but the pictures and the favorable financial conditions convinced the board and the membership of the newly formed consortium to give Ravello a chance.

Before the third year, Vittorio initiated the establishment of a state-of-the-art website, and this device and word of mouth attracted about a hundred participants to the meeting, which started in Rome and ended in two days in Ravello. It was love at first sight between the ICABR and Ravello. Villa Rufolo and the other palacios; the comfortable hotels captured us with their breath-taking vistas and delicate cuisine, the ceramic stores and the water holes near the city squares, the

limoncello and the Grappa. The two days of our initial visit established a tradition of enlightening and enjoyable meetings in Ravello that are likely to continue for years to come.

Vittorio wore many hats within the ICABR and the Ravello meetings. He was the ultimate host. He treated everyone as his guest and felt personally responsible for participants to enjoy the meetings. He loved Italy and was proud to showcase it to his guests. The tours he organized—to Pompeii, the Naples Museum, Capri, various sites in the Amalfi coast, concerts, and other events he orchestrated—reflected his sense of adventure and his refined tastes. Vittorio was an outstanding organizer and coordinator. While we loved to complain about the “glitches,” the late bus, the malfunctioning equipment, the noisy rooms, and the busy schedule, overall the Ravello meetings were very effective, and many of us returned every year and were asking for more. We realized Vittorio’s touch in the last two years when his health prevented him from being involved in all details of planning and management.

More than anything, Vittorio was an outstanding intellectual entrepreneur and leader. He was the dynamo pushing for the publishing of a new book, encouraging and demanding from his partners in the consortium’s leadership that they come up with new ideas and themes for each conference. He was always on the lookout for new presenters and intriguing new perspectives. He was fighting to include practitioners from industry, non-economists, and policymakers so as to maintain the excitement and relevance of the meetings.

The seven books that came out of the Ravello conferences, this special issue, the many papers that these meetings inspired, and the important role of the ICABR and its members in providing knowledge and expertise for policy decisions on agricultural biotechnology and related issues are directly linked to Vittorio’s leadership and vision. We all miss him, but his vision is carried forward as the Ravello conferences and the ICABR are thriving.

### ICABR Books

Evenson, R.E., Gollin, D., & Santaniello, V. (1998). *Agricultural values of plant genetic resources*. Wallingford, UK: CABI.

Evenson, R.E., & Santaniello, V. (2004). *Consumer acceptance of genetically modified foods*. Wallingford, UK: CABI.

Evenson, R.E., & Santaniello, V. (2004). *The regulation of agricultural biotechnology*. Wallingford, UK: CABI.

Evenson, R.E., & Santaniello, V. (2006). *International trade and policies for genetically modified products*. Wallingford, UK: CABI.

Evenson, R.E., Santaniello, V., & Zilberman, D. (2002). *Economic and social issues in agricultural biotechnology*. Wallingford, UK: CABI.

Santaniello, V., Evenson, R.E., & Zilberman, D. (2002). *Market development for genetically modified foods*. Wallingford, UK: CABI.

Santaniello, V., Evenson, R.E., Zilberman, D., & Carlson, G.A. (2000). *Agriculture and intellectual property rights*. Wallingford, UK: CABI.