

Article

Actors in Social Agriculture Cooperatives Combating Organized Crime in Southern Italy: Cultivating the Ground

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Abstract: Southern Italy suffers from a high poverty rate, unemployment, emigration flows, and a strong presence of organized crime in the field of agriculture. This study seeks to investigate the potential of social enterprises as driving forces for the legal and eco-social development of fragile Southern Italian areas. To work in such challenging contexts requires the development of a high level of resilience, which implies the ability to adapt to difficulties and to overcome crises by coming out stronger than before. The initiatives we detected in Southern Italy are examples for the strength that can come from ideal motivations. In the case of social agriculture initiatives in Southern Italy counteracting organized crime, these motivations are an indispensable condition for their survival and growth. The accumulation of problems and difficulties, however, risks corroding motivations of the actors. This can lead to the withdrawal of members, which can have a serious impact on these small organizations. Thus, idealism is a necessary condition to face the challenges of legal and social environmental development, but it is not sufficient on its own, except in the short term, to allow social enterprises to emerge from extremely precarious conditions. Idealism can support resilience, but by itself, it cannot create a sustainable change. There is, therefore, the need to invest in these social enterprises, in the training of the actors involved, and in the selection and acquisition of the skills for strengthening the efficiency and sustainability of businesses and to foster horizontal structures of mutuality and solidarity to create a supportive environment for these social enterprises and their mission.

Keywords: idealism of social entrepreneurs; resilience of social enterprises; legal and eco-social development; disadvantaged rural areas

1. Introduction

European governments are investing many resources into promoting models of diverse enterprises that can contribute towards solving the problems of rural areas, such as a lack of employment opportunities and territorial fragility. Concepts of social innovation [1], diverse or social and solidarity economy [2,3], and social enterprises have all entered the debate regarding the development of marginalized rural areas [4]. These concepts, often used interchangeably, refer to models and forms of enterprises that generate employment and income while primarily following social objectives, which are prioritized over monetary profit [5]. There is a high interest regarding the role of social and solidarity economy in creating social, economic, and ecological development, especially in marginal rural territories that lack public and economic structures. Despite the relevance of the actors of these diverse economies as promoters of rural change and development, there is still a lack of empirical evidence related to the capacity of such enterprises to improve the situation of marginal areas [6].

The purpose of this study was to investigate the potential of social enterprises as driving forces for the development of fragile areas. It is grounded in the experiences of 20 pioneers of community-based social organizations, all acting in favor of legal and eco-sustainable development in disadvantaged territories of the Italian South. The research will contribute to an understanding of how tightly the success of these organizations is interconnected with the motivations of the promoters, the organizational structure, and the involvement of stakeholders.

The first part of this article presents the problems that cause the underdevelopment of marginal rural areas in the south of Italy. The second part describes the objectives and methodology of the research and its general empirical results. The concluding section outlines several considerations related to factors facilitating or constraining the economic and social performance of enterprises in social and solidarity economy, as agents of the development of marginal areas.

The Misery of the Italian South and the Emergence of the Social Enterprises Movement

Southern Italy suffers from a high poverty rate, unemployment, emigration flows and a problematic demographic change. The roots of this misery are historical [7]. While the north had a partial industrial development, the south remained locked in a system that could essentially be considered feudal. The “Southern Question” is still a major unresolved problem of the Italian modern state [8]. These precarious living conditions have sustained and continue to foster organized crime. The societal situation has been called “wild liberalism” [9], in which people live in situations of unemployment, poverty, and a lack of prospects, and state control is scarce. At the same time, organized crime has dominated and still dominates the everyday life of people in these regions. Mafia organizations are active in many economic sectors. The fact that they control agriculture along the whole supply chain means that the percentage of value added by the shadow economy in agriculture is higher than in other sectors [10]. The Italian National Antimafia Directorate reports that the turnover of the agro-mafia in 2015 was 12.5 billion euro [9]. Actual inspections performed by the national Italian research institute Eurispes detected that organized crime is a growing phenomenon in this productive sector, which is directly connected to the primary needs of millions of people [11].

Following the assassination of Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, two prominent anti-mafia judges and of other public actors occupying high offices of the state in the middle of the 1990s, a strong reaction from civil society took hold. “Libera: associations, names and numbers against mafias”, a network of different national, regional, and local organizations including the cooperative sector, labor unions, and NGOs, promoted the collection of more than 1 million signatures for the approval of a law (109/1996) that regulates the assignment of properties confiscated from mafia organizations for the service of public interests, such as security, justice, education, employment, social protection, or social services [12].

Following this groundbreaking law, the first social enterprises emerged, aiming at legal and eco-social development through the utilization of goods confiscated from mafia organizations. Their main activity is concerned with the field of social agriculture or green care, an innovative approach which unites several concepts: (i) the idea of agricultural multifunctionality, (ii) the provision of social and healthcare services, and (iii) the possibility to restore the agricultural sector and at the same time sustain the development of local communities [13,14]. Most of these social enterprises take the juridical form of social cooperatives, a socioeconomic model that was established in Italy with law 381/1991. This form of social enterprise allows for the organization of social and healthcare services as well as the labor integration of disadvantaged persons [15].

The implementation of social enterprises promoting legal and eco-social development accelerated with law 141/2015, regulating social agriculture in Italy, which became operative in 2015. This legal framework acknowledges the significance of the sector at the national level and provides an instrument to civil society actors trying to find answers to poverty and unemployment and the migrant emergency, especially in Southern Italian regions, counteracting discrimination and exploitation by organized crime in the agricultural sector [16].

The social enterprises working in these disadvantaged areas are confronted with many difficulties. Agriculture in the southern regions of Italy in general is less profitable; there is a lack of relevant infrastructure, the welfare costs per capita are the lowest in Italy, and the network of social services is very fragmented. To develop initiatives for legal and sustainable change under these conditions is very difficult. What is the driving force of the promoters of social enterprises to meet such a challenge? What does it mean to be pioneers of legal and sustainable community development in a highly hazardous environment, one which also presents personal risks to actors? How are the aspirations and motivations of these actors interconnected with the organizational dynamics of their actions?

2. Materials and Methods

To find answers to these questions, we scrutinized 20 social enterprises, most of them social cooperatives, operating in the field of legal and eco-social development in four regions of Southern Italy: Calabria, Campania, Sicily, and Puglia. We conducted 20 in-depth interviews with founders, members, and responsible actors of these various structures.

The intense interview process was organized as an iterative process. After a first interview and its transcription, follow-up interviews were conducted at least once in all cases, in order to clarify and deepen issues. Within these iterative cycles, new aspects or considerations arose. We contacted some of the interviewees up to four times, as this was not only a research exercise but an investment in trust building as well. To conduct research in the described field entails entering into heavily marked realities. The construction of a communicative base in the form of an authentic, safe, and dialogic relationship between the interviewees and the researchers is essential [17].

All interviews were conducted following the international ethical guidelines, first by obtaining an informed consent from participants and next by enacting measures for the protection of the participants' privacy.

3. Results

3.1. "We Want to Change Realities Here": The Power of Non-Economic Motivation

Entrepreneurship motivations are multifaceted [18]. Several authors have shown that there are different motivations between social enterprises and profit enterprises. For social enterprises, economic performance is instrumental in achieving social objectives. Companies dealing with legal and social environmental development are a clear example of the strength that derives from ideal motivations. To work in economically fragile contexts characterized by the intensive presence of organized crime, it is essential to develop a high level of resilience.

The president of a small social cooperative dealing with vegetable cultivation and processing explains, "Many sacrifices must be made to survive because it is difficult to go against the tide in these realities". Interviewees report multiple difficulties: the low profitability of agriculture, the lack of skilled labor, the lack of infrastructure for product commercialization, and the fragmentation of local civil society. The more explicit the aim to antagonize organized crime, the more difficult it is to find consensus among institutions and large sections of local communities. The coordinator of a social cooperative engaged in labor integration of migrants on land seized from criminal organizations explained that "those who denounce labor exploitation and the mafias must realize that they risk remaining isolated".

Many organizations report recurrent incidents of vandalism and intimidation by the mafias. Another element that makes it difficult for many interviewees to continue working is the "sense of loneliness" that is often experienced when their requests to the public administration are dealt with tardily, when they perceive a lack of support from the local community, or the indifference of institutions with regards to their daily commitment, which is often exhausting and financially unrewarding.

These contextual difficulties are clearly reflected in economic performance. Two-thirds of the enterprises studied remain in deficit or, at best, break even, even several years after start-up. Agricultural

production alone does not generate income margins. Moreover, a large portion of the enterprises cultivate small plots of land (between one and three hectares), which reduces their capacity for product commercialization.

Therefore, social enterprises engaged in legal and socioecological development face a chronic condition of difficulties. They are tested time and again for their resilience, which implies their ability to adapt to difficulties and to overcome crises by coming out stronger than before. In this case, resilience is an indispensable condition for survival and growth [19]. Organizational resilience is defined as an organization's ability to maintain or recover an acceptable level of functioning despite difficulties and failures [20]. For the social enterprises studied, resilience is strongly connected to idealism and to the awareness of the uniqueness of their role. The studied initiatives are all based on a principled commitment, which can be expressed by the slogan "We want to change realities here".

The director of a Calabrian social cooperative, which can be counted among the most exposed to acts of intimidation by organized crime, explained: "Our experience is that of a movement. We work here, where the exploitation is strongest. We are activists, we believe in what we do, and our values are more important than money". This perception of being an actor in the context of an important mission is the driving force of social movements, which play a central role in all processes of planned social change and societal evolution [21].

The aspiration to influence the socioeconomic conditions of the context is expressed in a variety of ways. In some cases, it manifests as a pedagogical objective aimed at showing that a different economy can be built on the territory, based on principles of reciprocity and solidarity. In other cases, the desired impact of social enterprise activities is more radical and aims at eradicating the legal, economic, and social conditions of underdevelopment caused by marginalization and not only by mere coexistence with the criminal economy.

The personal identification with the common project in some cases is so strong that the actors declare it as their life project. "For me it is practically all. I am one of those who has even neglected private life. It is my main objective, that, what I want to improve. It's my everyday work and development. Many of us have decided to marry this project. It's a perfect combination of social work and life. There is an identification between what we are and what we do".

Nevertheless, the vast majority of respondents are aware of the unique role played by their organizations in the local context. Neither public administrations nor the market seems to have the interest and the ability to intervene and address structural issues, whether it is a matter of costs, political commitment, or administrative capacity. One participant explained: "If you want to try to change something, you have to start from the bottom". What is required, in the eyes of many interviewees, is a change in the overall approach, which only self-organized companies moved by ideal aims can put into practice. "What we want to achieve with our work is a cultural transformation of the territory where our activities can represent a sort of immunization against the many years of violence and lack of rights it has suffered. Our work emerged from a territorial experience in which the Camorra has destroyed important elements of the society, for instance the relation between persons and trust. Our activities, besides creating economy, focus fundamentally on the cultural reconstruction of the territory".

3.2. Idealistic Motivations Challenged by Practical Difficulties

The ideals that drive most social enterprises to engage in the legal and social environmental development of a territory also makes them resilient to events that would undermine the trust and reaction capacity of many other organizations. However, ideals are a driving force that may produce unexpected effects.

In more than half of the studied enterprises, difficult conditions are long term. They often prevent the organizational and managerial leap that is necessary to build structures and growth. The characteristics of these social enterprises are similar: they have for the most part small or very small dimensions (from one to three employees), low specialization of the labor force, scarce productivity cultivations, and limited volume of production and marketing channels, which are largely

self-managed. The promoters are engaged full-time in the activity management and have little time and capacity left to attempt building alliances with trans-local support networks to transform products and promote marketing and communication campaigns. Often the promoters are also individuals that lack management skills required to handle an agricultural activity. Some are social workers experienced in reception of migrants or disadvantaged people, who see agriculture as a way to provide work and emancipation to marginalized individuals or victims of labor exploitation by criminal organizations. Agricultural skills are mainly acquired through learning processes in the field, and drawbacks are consequently frequent. Errors due to poor technical and professional training often lead to significant problems at different stages of the production process, compromising the quality of the harvest and its marketing.

These firms sell goods largely through informal channels or through joint buying groups that guarantee the purchase of production stocks at favorable but limited prices. As a result, economic income is rather limited, and the labor force is paid intermittently and at very low wages. An interviewee explains: “Last year for two months we gave up our salary because we had to throw away half of the harvest. We are hanging in there because we believe that what we do is important. Otherwise, we would have already closed the cooperative. But it is not easy”.

Moreover, the small size and the poor technical skills make it difficult to apply for funding. Getting projects financed or participating in tenders to access rural development funds demand organizational and legal requirements that small social enterprises lack.

In the early stages, the driving force of enthusiasm and ideals are often so powerful that the continuous problems faced by members may even stimulate engagement. In particular, when idealistic motivations are high, ongoing acts of vandalism and intimidation do not intimidate promoters, but rather enhance in them an awareness of the social relevance of their actions. The director of a cooperative that works with land seized from the big Sicilian mafia bosses recalls: “We have had by now dozens of intimidations. We are afraid, but we also understand that if they persist, it means that we are causing them trouble. So, what we do makes sense”.

As this statement indicates, the evaluation of success in community development initiatives is extremely subjective [22]. A few thousand tomato packages with a label that carries a slogan against the exploitation by criminal organizations is considered as a great achievement. Even very modest results can be interpreted as great successes, which provide important motivational incentives.

Over time, however, the accumulation of problems and difficulties risks corroding motivations. This can lead to the withdrawal of some members, which can have a serious impact on the chances of survival of small organizations. Budgetary problems especially tend to leave medium-term consequences in small organizations and are not easily solved. Revenues guarantee the payment of salaries, which, although low, are a symbolic sign of the material sustainability of the business project. If income is lacking, members must give up their salary or work underpaid. This might only be sustainable in the short term, but if problems persist, material survival issues emerge, which not even great idealists can bear. In addition, the precariousness of income and the low profitability of production do not allow the development of the promoters’ vision. “We earn as a cooperative a few tens of thousands of euros per year. We can barely pay salaries, but we are unable to make the necessary investments to grow the business, like buying a new tractor or renting more land”.

Not being able to rise from a precarious condition over time can also have a negative effect on internal relations, with the emergence of conflicts regarding the strategies to be adopted to overcome difficulties. The emergence of fractures and conflicting visions within cooperatives is serious because repeated criticism can undermine a common vision. Such a shared vision is essential to facilitate coordination and help implement successful solutions, by leveraging the contribution of all members of the organization [23].

3.3. From Passive Resilience to Active Resilience

Resilience can be divided into two distinct categories: passive resilience and active resilience. The former is a type of resistance to difficulties, while the latter implies a dynamic response aimed at change. In order to implement active resilience strategies, social enterprises need two types of cognitive and operational skills.

Cognitive skills refer to the vision and sensemaking capacity that allow an organization to make its mission consistent with the challenges posed by the complexity of the environment [24]. For the social enterprises under study, the strategies to transform passive resilience into active resilience involve, particularly, the development of an entrepreneurial vision of legal and socioenvironmental development. In this respect, the president of a group of Calabrian social enterprises asserts, “Our success is based on the idea that ethics can be a formidable driver of economic development. Through the construction of a successful business model, the goal is to create—for the community and citizens—an alternative between legal models of development and illegal models. (...) we use the enterprise to show concretely that staying on the side of legality is more convenient than staying on the side of illegality and that staying on the side of emancipation is better than being subjects [to illegality]”.

The principle that successful social enterprises seek to implement is based on mutualism. The value generated through entrepreneurial development is not retained by the company except for the part necessary to cover costs and finance investments, while the rest is distributed among the local community in form of job creation, payment of regular wages, and the possibility of participating in tangible and intangible benefits of the entrepreneurial project.

Mutualism is a rational strategy, which develops under the conviction that socioenvironmental and legal development is feasible only when the community perceives a concrete benefit in participating and supporting the social enterprises' activities.

Drawing on the literature, active resilience emerges when cognitive abilities and behavioral capabilities converge at a common point [25]. The behavioral capabilities that enable the translation of visions and strategies into practices are skills, resources, social capital, and flexibility in the decision-making processes.

The social enterprises, which are able to cope with local contextual difficulties, are first of all equipped—from the very beginning—with technical, managerial, and strategic skills. The business project does not originate exclusively from ideal motivations but also from an economic and organizational development plan. Social enterprises with better results in terms of employment, income and size of farmed land have personnel qualified in agriculture and managers and experts specialized in different development areas. “Running a social business against mafia means, first of all, that we have to be able to stand up on our own legs. The great common limitation of many experiences is that they are rooted in ideality, but this is not enough”. Basic knowledge can be the result of initial investments or, more frequently, the result of collaborations and participations of individual enterprises in larger networks in which they can pool knowhow and resources, thus enabling the creation of economies of scale.

Furthermore, the ability to transform motivations and ideals into active resilience depends—in turn—on the ability to recover and differentiate the income. For example, the smallest enterprises included in the sample are almost all mono-service and live only by harvesting and selling agricultural products. On the contrary, bigger companies are, except for one case, multiservice. Several respondents are aware that, in a disadvantaged territory, it is extremely difficult to survive only performing agricultural activities. For this reason, various enterprises differentiate their activities combining agriculture with environmental education, didactic activities, ergotherapy, or job placement. The two more successful enterprises have also developed social tourism activities contributing to attract resources to reinvest in business progress.

On the other side, small enterprises do not have specialized personnel; this lack undermines their development trajectories, since technical skills are useful and necessary to access local or regional development programs, which instead could represent for them what Moulaert and MacCallum define

as innovative experiments [1]. Last but not least, the social enterprises that implement active resilience strategies are part of networks from which they draw support, exchange resources, and build political and strategic partnerships. The local rootedness in areas characterized by a high criminal presence threatens to become an insurmountable obstacle to development. In this scenario, many interviewees underline the difficulty in selling products in the local sphere due to the control—exerted by criminal organizations—over the local distribution networks, but also the reluctance and low sensitivity of the local population towards purchasing products that have the explicit purpose of changing the local legal and socioeconomic context. “Unfortunately, our first enemies are those who should be our friends. We sell 90% of production to other regions through channels that are not local, such as the big national cooperative circuits. If we had not had this opportunity to jump over the local level, we would never have been able to rise as a business because here people do not buy ethical products and, if you talk them about anti-mafia products, even less”.

The membership of extra-local economic and political association networks such as Libera (the largest national association network combating the mafia) is also the ground for the creation of ethical brands (Libera, Goel, Southern Project of the Catholic Church) that contribute to increasing the value added of the products. This translates into a market price that guarantees a profit to be reinvested in the development of other activities. Such networking is also of great importance for the ability to mobilize the collectivity against acts of vandalism and intimidation suffered by the various enterprises. “After the last act of vandalism (i.e., over a hundred olive trees were cut), hundreds of people came from all over Italy to manifest in support of the cooperative. This is the best insurance we could have activated against N’drangheta”.

3.4. Social Enterprises between State and Market

Social enterprises are often conceptualized as actors addressing problems that the state and market are not interested in or are not able to respond to [26]. While this is partly true, policies and relations with the market still remain important. It is worth noting that enterprises that manage to generate income and employment recover part of their income with public funding. This takes place in various forms: directly through contributions for small projects, contracts for the provision of social services, work grants for job placement, or indirectly through the concession of land and real estate properties seized from the mafia. “It is difficult to live only with agriculture. We sell everything under the Libera Terra brand and we have commercialization agreements with food chains around Italy. So, we can also earn good money, more than those who sell without a brand. However, more than 70% of the land we cultivate is seized from the mafia. If we were to think about buying it or paying a rent, it would be difficult for us today”.

Other enterprises are able to generate income because they receive public work grants for job placement, which allow them to save considerable labor costs. Similarly, the contracts for the provision of social services, the integration of disabled people or for ergotherapy, for instance, provide additional resources to those deriving from agriculture, converting into differentiation of both resources and services they offer. With only public resources, no social enterprise under study could start social agriculture projects. Moreover, if the payments for the social services were only public, the possibility of distributing income and employment to the local community would be lacking. Only with the possibility of having seized land in concession or counting on stable supplementary resources for the employment of some disadvantaged persons is there a real opportunity to reduce the precariousness faced by the enterprises when entering the social services market. Too often, the main problem for them is represented by the fragmentation of public policies and the formal obstacles to obtaining the resources they offer. The smallest companies, for example, do not satisfy the requirements for applying to rural development funding programs. Furthermore, the procedures for requesting confiscated land and assets are often cumbersome in front of a bureaucracy, which slows down the process. Resultantly, only the most structured social enterprises and the ones that are lucky enough to operate in more favorable local contexts are able to access public support. An essential role for assuring the success of

social enterprises dealing with legal and socioenvironmental development in marginal rural areas is played by markets. Social farming practices can only be profitable if there is a demand and people are willing to pay a decent price. Taking into account that, especially in marginal areas, agriculture has very low margins of profitability—in order to create value added—the enterprises involved in the study mainly rely on the ethical and social value of social agriculture. All companies produce organically, but this is not enough to guarantee an income. “To earn something, it is necessary that those who buy recognize the social value of our work”. However, in the target territories, a so-called ethical demand is largely absent. “Here in the south there is no culture of critical consumption. Maybe something in urban centers but otherwise completely missing. (...) Families usually all have a vegetable garden or land plot, so they do not even need to buy anything more than what they self-produce”.

As a consequence, products are usually sold locally to a few friends and sympathizers, with very little or no earnings. The unique alternative is then the construction of channels for access to extra-local markets. In so doing, the most structured enterprises work with ethical trade networks or cooperatives at a national level, while the smallest ones, in the few cases in which they succeed, rely on personal contacts to distribute the products in some small associative realities in the central and northern regions. Therefore, the presence and the size of ethical markets constitute an essential factor for thinking about social enterprises operating in the social agriculture sector as actors of legal and socioenvironmental development. In this perspective, the social enterprises are of course not autonomous, but they strongly depend not only on their ability to create contacts, but also on the presence of markets that enhance their production in economic and social terms.

4. Discussion

Marginal rural areas are characterized by very complex social economic problems that either discourage or make state and market intervention difficult. According to many observers and policy makers, social enterprises are actors capable of overcoming the failures of the public and profit sectors. Even with a limited sample, the research provides some empirical evidence that allows us to shed light on the reality of social entrepreneurship in the rural peripheries affected by crime. Despite the great diversity of experiences, several of the entities analyzed show that they can generate jobs, income, and, at the same time, promote forms of redistribution of tangible and intangible benefits at the community level. The biggest entities are employing more than 100 permanent and seasonal workers. Their contract terms are in line with the national regulation and, through their presence, these enterprises become a point of reference for the local community, demonstrating that another way of living and that running a business is possible. The empirical evidence, however, shows a highly fragmented reality. Building on this, we can draw some considerations regarding the main question of the survey, namely “what role can these companies play in fostering rural development in disadvantaged areas?” The research results highlight that social enterprises possess a variety of elements that can be used as operational tools to act on and within rural communities.

Firstly, social enterprises are organizations that pursue ideal objectives. The economic and employment dimension is functional to the achievement of social goals. This configuration makes these organizations particularly suitable for attracting and organizing the interests and effort of individuals motivated by non-economic reasons, which are, in the end, the only ones able to push them to operate in such difficult contexts. In addition, social purposes tend to orient the action towards the community’s interest and not only towards that of the entrepreneurs, by promoting the preservation of the territory and the activation of eco-socially sustainable forms of agricultural production.

Secondly, the associative and cooperative nature of social enterprises favors participation and facilitates the mobilization of resources for dealing with problems proper of the interaction between enterprise and external environment. Consistently, organizational and governance systems favoring horizontal coordination over hierarchy seem to be more suitable for the entrepreneurial action, since they offer the instruments to process information more effectively and to better coordinate responses to problems by mobilizing available resources towards a single objective [27].

Thirdly, the nature of the social enterprises' objectives attributes an ethical and social value to production. In this diversification and valorization, they find the inroads for stable economic success through the sale of products with recognizable ethical brands. As an interviewee says: "when people buy our products, they do not buy a pack of tomatoes or a kilo of oranges, but what these products represent: the fight against mafia, social commitment, the desire to develop a territory bent by injustice".

5. Conclusions

This study shows the capacities of social enterprises, driven by idealistic actors, which can be pioneers of legal and sustainable community development, also in a highly hazardous environment, presenting personal risks to the actors. We also show that the aspirations and motivations of these actors are interconnected with the organizational dynamics of embedded social cooperatives, dedicated consortia, and horizontal solidarity networks. Such enterprises are not only relevant for the development of Southern Italy, but for many other disadvantaged areas where neither market nor public authorities are able to initiate social change and development.

In conclusion we must, however, point out that the idealization of the role of social enterprises is reductive and may fail in the promotion of strategies for rural development, which in the medium term, may prove ineffective. This is because, first of all, specific skills and organizational structures are required to run a social enterprise. As confirmed by several other studies, social enterprises operating in marginal rural contexts must, for example, manage their activity in an economically sustainable way, enhance human resources, and access and govern plural economic resources [28]. The enthusiasm deriving from idealism is not a sufficient engine to make companies grow and transform into real factors of local development. Idealism can support resilience, but by itself, it cannot create a real change. There is, therefore, the need to invest in these social entities, in the training of the actors involved, and in the selection and acquisition of the skills for strengthening the efficiency and sustainability of businesses.

Then, we have to consider that social enterprises become effective in relation to—and depending on—the context in which they operate. Ecosystems contain and can activate (or not activate) the resources for development: non-collaborative local institutions, presence or absence of inter-organized networks operating at local level, presence or absence of specialized human resources, and marketing and communication infrastructures are, for example, conditions that must be carefully assessed before starting innovative projects in marginal and difficult contexts.

In this respect, the study also shows how public policies and the structure of the markets may be minefields for the success of social enterprises. The role of public policies is an issue already analyzed in other studies on social enterprises in rural areas [29]. Various legislative measures such as the law on the confiscation of the assets from the mafia organizations create, undoubtedly, a favorable terrain for launching the actions of a social enterprise. Nevertheless, only the more structured entities are able to access these programs, while the others do not have the material and human resources to manage such complexity; the former can access financing opportunity for specific projects, while the latter often do not even have the technical requirements or the professional skills to do so. The result is that many organizations remain in a condition of mere survival with the risk of disappearing in the medium term, crushed by difficulties that, at a certain point, they are no longer able to face. Hence, we are here in front of not only the death of the organizations but of the social and human capital that gave them life. With them, the main lever for change in marginal areas disappears.

As reported above, social enterprises, in addition to public policies to promote local development, also need markets in which they can commercialize their products at a price level, which allows them to cover production costs and generate a profit. Usually, the conditions of fragility in agriculture are so exacerbated that even the shift from traditional production to organic production is insufficient to produce profits. Therefore, in these contexts, only the ethical brands can create solid roots for market competitiveness. Accordingly, the construction of supra-local alliances with ethical and sustainable

trade networks is becoming the unavoidable step for sustaining the action of social enterprises engaged in social agriculture within a broader strategy of rural development.

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