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How to cite this article:

Bianchi, M. (2022). Italian community co-operatives and their agency role in sustainable community development. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 55(3), 65-77.

# Italian Community Co-operatives and their Agency Role in Sustainable Community Development

**Michele Bianchi**

Italian community co-operatives are the most recent evolution of the Italian co-operative movement. They operate to carry out community development processes, which involve the local population in the re-thinking of socio-economic models of local development. They also create business opportunities using local resources and assets with particular attention to cultural aspects, local environments, and people's needs. Generally, these co-operatives expand the mutualistic benefits — typically shared among co-operative members — with other community members because of the common belonging to the same place. Therefore, community co-operatives develop “community economies” for the general interest. What is less known about this phenomenon is whether and how community co-operatives consider the sustainability of their missions and activities. Drawing on sustainable community development theory, this paper reports on a comparative study of 17 Italian community co-operatives based on semi-structured interviews with representatives. Findings show how members use the co-operatives as an agency to foster sustainable development in their communities.

## Introduction

Since their creation in the mid-nineteenth century, co-operatives have promoted economic development. During the second half of the last century, the movement has mostly lost its value of mutuality among members in favour of a more profit-making mission (Bianchi, 2019). Despite this deviation from the original purposes and aims, a new wave of co-operatives in various countries have begun to rediscover the fundamental application of this model as a way to self-organise economic resources around political and social claims.

As in the past, new co-operatives develop bottom-up responses to the most exploitative dynamics of capitalism and promote new forms of solidarity (O'Shaughnessy & O'Hara, 2016; Vieta, 2010). This new wave, which has rediscovered the core values of mutual collaboration, political activism and democratisation of the economy, has been named “new cooperativism” (Ridley-Duff, 2020; Vieta, 2018).

The Italian co-operative movement has witnessed a dual phase of the new cooperativism wave: in the late 1980s, the rise of the social co-operative model as a new way to organise local social services (Borzaga & Galera, 2016); then, the emergence of a new model devoted to fostering community development processes through a variety of services in both rural and urban areas (e.g., agriculture, cultural activities, environment protection, food service, tourism). These have been called “community cooperatives” (Bianchi, 2021b; Mori & Sforzi, 2018) and demonstrate that the co-operative model is adaptable to the community development process. This is a bottom-up process that groups of citizens, organisations or public institutions can use to achieve various objectives related to community wellbeing (Phillips & Pittman, 2015). These goals can include the implementation of social inclusion, public health, people's working skills or economic opportunities (Craig et al., 2011; Emejulu, 2016; Henderson & Vercseg, 2010).

This paper aims to contribute to the examination of this latest growing trend in the Italian context to consider whether the new cooperativism can contribute to sustainable development, one of the most critical challenges of our times. Can community co-operatives implement models of sustainable development? In which ways do they do this? Do they raise awareness in their communities? To answer these questions, the research builds on a previous study (Bianchi & Vieta, 2019) and additionally draws on sustainable community development theory (Flint, 2013) to examine the experience of 17 Italian community co-operatives. The paper presents first an

overview of the research topic and the theoretical framework. It then illustrates the methodology and the results collected through interviews. Finally, there is a discussion of findings that allows the determining of the conclusion.

## Community Co-operatives and Sustainable Development

As Billis (2010) explains, “third sector” organisations — such as the community co-operatives (Bianchi, 2021b) — tend to have strong roots in and identification with their communities, engaging them through participatory activities to determine a social impact. From another perspective, community co-operatives can be considered as a form contributing to the social and solidarity economy (Quarter et al., 2017; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2019). Additionally, co-operatives have been demonstrated to be an adequate organisational form to promote place-making development according to community needs and potentialities (Webster et al., 2021). Furthermore, co-operatives are collective businesses, not charities; this implies their constant propensity to enhance business efficacy while they also grow members’ inclinations toward democratic participation (Vieta, 2018). This collective ownership allows them to be rooted in the territory where they operate. How they achieve their mission and goals are various. They operate in different sectors and generate benefits for the well-being of their communities, considering all the residents as potential beneficiaries of their co-operative advantage (Mori & Sforzi, 2018).

Sustainable development emerged as a concept to mitigate the debate between environmental protection and economic growth in the late 1970s and 1980s. Over the following decades, it has evolved achieving a more complex theoretical structure. While numerous models of sustainable development propose diverse angles, what appears as a common aspect is the interrelationship between environmental, social, and economic spheres to implement sustainable development (Cillo et al., 2019). Indeed, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015) proposes a more holistic vision than previous initiatives. This new vision finds expression in the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Fukuda-Parr, 2016).

## The Sustainable Community Development: A Framework for the Analysis

To examine how Italian community co-operatives operate to enhance local sustainable development, this research adopts Flint’s (2013) approach to “sustainable community development” as the main theoretical framework. This identifies the main domains for local sustainable development — through community development — pointing to the role of the local agency — see Figure 1 below. At each vertex, there are the main areas of sustainable community development that are interconnected to each other: economic development; environmental sustainability; and social development. In the middle are the co-operatives that operate as an agency, as explained in more detail below.

Figure 1: The theoretical framework of sustainable community development



The first domain, the economic aspect, includes the creation of economic opportunities for development and solutions to local economic issues, which can be achieved through the generation of new job positions and economic resources (Roseland, 2000). It is important to consider how the economic growth of a community can serve the community's interest and enhance its well-being. This can happen through local resources and assets under local control and maintained under local control for the community's benefit (Mathie & Cunningham, 2005). It is necessary to see the community at the centre of the economic development process instead of considering it as just a space where it happens. This involves the active role of local organisations and leaders in determining strategies for community wealth and empowerment, avoiding exploitation and negative effects (Haughton, 2013).

The second domain is planning strategies for sustainability to reduce the impact on the local environment. This is strictly connected to the more traditional sense of sustainable development, as environmental protection and reduction of human activities that harm nature where the solutions that can be adopted include recycling, reducing pollution, producing and using green energy (Schaffer et al., 2004). Environmental sustainability is tied to both economic and social development because the first needs to consider the impact on the environment, while the second has to understand the effects and implications of climate changes on the society (Cillo et al., 2019). Therefore, sustainable development can be seen as the eco-efficiency of all human actions; the constant search for a balance between these activities and their impact on both the environment and the society (Caiado et al., 2017).

The third domain is the social sphere of local sustainable development. As the SDGs highlight, sustainability can no more be associated only with the safety of the environment. It must encompass also social justice, social inclusion and poverty reduction (Le Blanc, 2015). At the centre of this entire framework, there is the active engagement of local communities to foster awareness that can generate bottom-up strategies to implement sustainable community development.

Within the framework, community co-operatives act as an agent for sustainable development (Newman & Dale, 2005). Generally, the concept of "agency" defines the capacity of a subject "to plan and initiate action" (Onyx & Bullen, 2000, p. 29), as well as to react to variations outside its "immediate sphere of influence" to effect a desired change on those (Newman & Dale, 2005, p. 481). The objective is to promote social action that fosters changes in the social, cultural, political and economic dimensions (Dale & Sparkes, 2011).

A fundamental aspect of efficient agency for sustainable community development is social capital; this can enhance the engagement of local stakeholders in implementing sustainable community development projects through networks created around an organisation with social purposes (Ling & Dale, 2014). Social capital is here intended as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Moreover, social capital can generate community well-being when it is addressed toward common interests. This can happen when values of trustworthiness and collaboration govern these networks (Putnam, 2000). Therefore, the agency of a community for its own development occurs when a group of individuals or an organisation assume the leadership of this process and address the main issues in the local society by proposing innovative solutions (Bianchi, 2021a).

## **Research Design**

This research presents the analysis of 17 Italian community co-operatives that are active in the implementation of local development based on sustainable development principles. It is important to consider that sustainable community development is strongly related to the social, economic, and geographical context where it is implemented. Therefore, the research design has set various selection criteria to guarantee a certain grade of variation in the sample, so

as to enable some degree of generalisation of the results (Eisenhardt, 1989). This approach permits a generalisation of results. Since Italy does not have a national register of community co-operatives (a national bill is currently under discussion at the Parliament — November 2022), it was necessary to consult experts from the two main national confederations of co-operatives, Confcooperative ([www.confcooperative.it/](http://www.confcooperative.it/)) and Legacoop ([www.legacoop.coop/](http://www.legacoop.coop/)) — see the Appendix for an overview of research participants. First, the selected co-operatives are based in various regions; second, they operate in diverse economic sectors; third, they are at different stages in their life cycle, such as “start-up”, “consolidation”, and “maturity” (Stevens, 2001). The size of the selected sample represents approximately 10% of the current (at the time of the research) population of community co-operatives in Italy (Venturi & Miccolis, 2022).

The main research tool has been semi-structured interviews (Corbetta, 2003) held online between November and December 2021 and lasted an average of 20 minutes. All the interviewees are workers of the co-operatives and able to represent their organisations. The questions focused on how the co-operatives promote community development; in which ways they promote sustainable development and how they frame it; and the outputs and effects on the local communities.

In the second phase of the study, the interviews were transcribed and data elaborated through a system of iterative coding and categorisation (Neale, 2016) using the Nvivo software. The key themes around which the findings are presented are: community development, economic development, environmental sustainability, social capital, and social development.

## Findings

### Community development

Depending on the motivations underpinning the choice to be a sustainable community co-operative, a number of different areas of activities arise. Certain co-operatives perceive a threat to the local environment (e.g. loss of autochthonous plants or environment degradation) and decide to act to save it through forest and agricultural activities. Others consider how certain subjects (young, migrants, or elder people) in their communities suffer social exclusion and activate services to favour their integration and assistance. A further area where co-operatives take action is the provision of adequate local services (education, transport, or local retail) in communities where these are lacking. The process of community development can also begin with the necessity to regenerate a local asset and then use it as a hub for new projects (e.g. a public park, a community bakery, or houses). Co-operatives do not necessarily fit into just one of the above categories; they may combine various goals and promote a holistic approach to local development:

All activities are developed around the idea of urban sustainable regeneration and social aggregation of this portion of the city. We manage local educational services, projects for migrants' integration and cultural activities in the main square of the neighbourhood (Interview 4).

We are the outcome of a long political process for claiming the abandoned lands for agriculture; we have engaged both political and civil organisations. We have imagined an alternative for these fields, projects for social aggregation and sustainable agriculture (Interview 6).

The common aspect is the identification of these necessities (e.g., need for local economic development, urban or assets regeneration, educational activities or solutions for migrants' integration) through an open dialogue with the community, which defines goals to prefigure a new perspective on its future. Co-operators put forward their interpretation of local issues and propose possible solutions to these issues by seeking ideas and feedback from local community members. Many co-operators stress the aspect of taking care of the community and the territory where they live. This is translated into a solution for people (assisting with their social needs such as education or integration, supporting elder people in remote communities, making green spaces more accessible, introducing organic food in local markets); the preservation of

the environment; and the generation of new possibilities to counter pre-existing conditions that compromised their livelihood (e.g., few job opportunities, few services, absence of initiatives to promote social engagement):

We are a community co-operative because we take care of this territory; we try to make it more attractive while we promote a new model of social inclusion (Interview 12).

This co-operative relies on the mutual-aid concept; we try to combine the few resources and peoples' skills in this small village [300 residents] to generate benefit for everyone (Interview 13).

Findings show how the co-operatives operate as agents for local development by setting various goals that combine economic and social development. The next step is to analyse how they conceptualise sustainable development in their work.

**Sustainable development**

In terms of sustainable development — in the strict sense of environmental protection, human impact reduction, and eco-efficiency — Italian community co-operatives implement various actions and define diverse strategies. Many of these co-operatives consider the SDGs as an important landmark to examine and programme their work. Fourteen out of seventeen interviewees know about Agenda 2030 and its goals, and eight out of seventeen co-operatives have used these to analyse their work and/or plan it. Alongside, it is interesting to examine which stakeholder groups have influenced the co-operatives to set sustainable development as a mission. Table 1 reports results regarding which group has determined this choice.

Table 1: Who most influences the sustainability of community co-operatives?

Groups	Responses
Founders	14
Other members of the co-operative (workers, supporters, suppliers)	9
Local partners (those with an active relationship with the co-operative)	5
Clients and customers (final users of the products and services)	5

Note: Interviewees could indicate more than one category

In terms of goals, many co-operatives consider their mission as the protection of the local environment and the promotion of organic and biodynamic agriculture. The reason for this choice is their position in rural and mountain areas where they live in close contact with nature. Many co-operatives work for forest resources management, biodiversity conservation and agricultural production with various sustainable approaches. This commitment can also stem from the revitalisation of old farming traditions — typical of the pre-industrial period — that considered more the re-use of material and coexistence with the local environment:

We have a range of diverse goals in the field of sustainable agriculture. We do not work with the idea of intense production, we want to protect the local chestnut tree woods; moreover, we pick fruits and vegetables by hand to avoid the use of the machine and have a lower impact (Interview 17).

The aim of a more sustainable local economic system influences the creation of commercial relationships to advance “Zero Km” products. Therefore, those co-operatives that work in the food sector select local producers or products, while those that operate in the tourism sector carry out the idea of “slow tourism”. As explained below, co-operatives select local suppliers for their structures and services. Even in the construction sector, it is possible to choose local materials and workforce to reduce the pollution caused by transport. A further strategy to improve sustainability is the re-using and recycling of materials:

We buy from local producers and ask people and our employees to do the same (Interview 4).

For our bakery, we only use local products; obviously, they cost more than the industrial ones but we can support other small local enterprises in this way (Interview 7).

In line with this choice, many co-operatives consider as a primary goal the regeneration of local assets for their business activities. This also allows for reducing the use of land or new materials in favour of a renewal of existing resources. In many mountainous villages, de-population has caused the abandonment or under-use of thousands of houses; therefore, many co-operatives have contacted the owners and proposed agreements for using them as B&Bs:

After WWII, 2,000 people lived in this village, now 200; hence, we have approximately 1,700 beds we can re-use for sustainable and diffused tourism (Interview 1).

In some cases, co-operatives, particularly those in the urban contexts, promote an idea of sustainable mobility through electric vehicles (e.g. e-bikes or hybrid cars). In other cases, co-operatives have focused their efforts towards other assets such as a local square (interview 4), a public park (interviews 5 and 6) or buildings (interviews 7, 15 and 16) following a strategy of sustainable regeneration (energy efficiency or sustainable building materials).

We manage also public assets; this is a public-private partnership for mutual and community benefit. The town hall does not have to invest funds and we can have them promote an idea of sustainable tourism that poses attention to local products and traditions (Interview 14).

This approach outlined in the quote above, together with the earlier mention of the concept of slow tourism, opposes the massification of tourism and tries to avoid its negative effects, such as the deterioration and exploitation of local resources and assets. Italian community co-operatives consider slow tourism as a way to attract more resources to their territories, promote local products and cultures, and find solutions to re-use assets for the local economy.

## **Economic growth**

As a key domain of the sustainable community development triangle, the economic aspect also requires adequate attention in this analysis. As explained in the theoretical analysis, community co-operatives respond to the necessity of combining a social mission with the creation of economic resources to carry out the community development process through the co-operative firm.

Being a business is necessary for the promotion of community development processes because these require constant work on the territory to plan actions, design strategies, and manage networks and resources. Co-operatives can create jobs, produce services and products, and combine them to allow the economic sustainability of all the activities, even those that do not generate incomes but provide social benefit (as explained in the next section).

In addition, community co-operatives can work towards improving economic opportunities for other local businesses, such as interviews 3 or 14 that operate to increase tourist influxes in their territories and network with other firms in the same business area to share the benefits of these achievements. Similarly, interview 9 has constituted a plethora of collaborations with local businesses to produce a collective effort aimed at fostering local tourism. Interviews 7 and 8 have established partnerships with other producers to define local supply chains and have common economic benefits. In addition, interview 12 has recently formed a consortium with other social businesses to compete together for bigger orders.

Last month [October 2021] we had a workshop during the weekend with many guests; I called other B&B hosts and asked for their availability. They were really surprised because they do not usually work during this part of the year. So, they have now understood the importance of our work and the deriving benefits for them (Interview 16).

Particularly in the rural and mountain areas, even the creation of a few new job positions can have an impact on counteracting the process of de-population. The Italian inner areas have witnessed this trend of outward migration since the 1950s because of better working and living conditions in cities.

We employ local people to help them to remain in this territory. Additionally, we support migrants' settling that can help to re-populate the village (Interview 5).

Rural and mountain community co-operatives use mutual benefit to provide useful services and job opportunities that can attract people moving to or remaining in these areas. Many of these co-operatives hope that the recent conversion of many working tasks from office-based to smart working can incentivise people to move to rural and mountain areas where they can find these community co-operatives ready to welcome them.

## **Social development**

The social development domain as part of the sustainable community development triangle encompasses those activities that do not have an economic aim but are functional to achieve the social mission. Incomes from services provision and product purchases can directly sustain the costs of other activities to provide assistance, education, social support, and favour social aggregation.

Community co-operatives assess local social needs through members' daily life experiences in the community or through networks of collaborations with other local partners involved in the third sector. Generally, co-operative members plan actions to use the firm's resources to assist those subjects in difficulties. This is the case for interviews 4, 5, 8, 10, 12, 13 and 17, which support migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in the process of integration by providing job opportunities, internships, help with bureaucracy and, in certain cases, accommodation. Interview 4 also has an active service to support homeless people in its neighbourhood.

This co-operative was born also to give migrants a chance for integration (Interview 12).

After the opening of a SPRAR [Sistema Protezione Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati — System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees], we have decided to open the co-operative to both help their integration and do something for the village (Interview 13).

Another aspect that many community co-operatives consider is the risk for elder people's social isolation in rural and mountain areas. Although these kinds of activities do not generate any income, many co-operatives have the mission of not leaving the elderly alone, understanding that a consequence of de-population is the decrease of social relationships and safe networks for these people. This is the case of interviews 1 and 13 which are based in small villages in the Appennino mountains. Their core businesses are agriculture, hospitality, and tourism, so they can also finance services of social support to elder people and transport those without a private vehicle to nearby main cities for errands. This is an example of coexistence of economic and social activities:

During the lockdown, we had never left our old people alone. There was always a couple of our employees available for any necessity or just to be in contact with them and prevent them from feeling alone (Interview 13).

Generally, community co-operatives favour social aggregation of people around the themes of local development and social innovation. Co-operators want to achieve citizens' engagement with — or at least awareness of — their work to improve their capacity to respond to local needs:

We are young locals. We have decided to stay here for our future, and this is a positive sign. We try to engage local citizens in our activities and foster the civic activism to give voice to the community's needs (Interview 10).

There is a grass-roots participation that demonstrates the willingness for a change (Interview 11).

Social development appears as an important side of the community development process because it looks at the social contingencies in the community and tries to find innovative solutions.

## **Social capital**

The presence of networks of collaborations and partnerships has multiple functions in the agency of Italian community co-operatives for both their work and their goals toward sustainable community development. As it is possible to observe in the previous sections, the realisation

of the three-side structure of sustainable community development passes through a series of collaborations and partnerships with other local actors:

People's participation is fundamental, they address our work and indicate those issues on which we have to work. We are part of this social network; there is a mutual exchange between us and the community and we share the same values (Interview 2).

First, the social relationships with citizens, public authorities, and other private organisations are a fundamental way to establish those connections and understand the contexts in which these co-operatives operate. Second, these networks help to foster ideas on sustainable community development and to influence other actors to implement them — either in a partnership or autonomously — through strategies aligned to the realisation of this goal.

These co-operatives often look for opportunities to collaborate with other members of the community; they foster the goals of sustainable development trying to inspire change also in other local actors and starting new projects with them to drive the sustainability of the community:

Our business looks for synergies with other firms to create both social and economic sustainability along with environmental (Interview 3).

We have convinced other local businesses to go plastic-free (Interview 4).

We support those agricultural firms that do not use pesticides, respect the environment and promote local products to generate interconnections with organisations similar to us (Interview 7).

We have brought the story of our co-operative and our vision on agriculture to one of the local high-schools to teach sustainability (Interview 8).

Generally, community co-operatives were found to generate social capital in the community to enhance their comprehension of local issues to design better solutions. They have found positive feedback from both public (local authorities or agencies for national parks) and private (other businesses or third sector organisations) local actors. This has permitted the consolidation of the role of these co-operatives in their communities. Moreover, the sharing of benefits as outcomes of the community development processes has strengthened the relationships because locals can directly witness the effects of the sustainable community development project.

## Discussion

The community co-operatives involved in this research present similar characteristics that denote their common belonging to the field of community development. As already demonstrated by the international co-operative movement, the combination of ethical values with practical strategies, adapted to local factors, generates solutions for diverse contexts (Webster et al., 2021). These are bottom-up initiatives from members of the interested communities who decide to take action for economic and social empowerment (Phillips & Pittman, 2015). The output of these processes of community development is the collective action to respond to multiple issues and/or take advantage of diverse opportunities (Mori & Sforzi, 2018). Co-operatives explicitly work to maximise what has been called “the co-operative advantage for community development” (Vieta & Lionais, 2015, p. 2)

As the findings show, community co-operatives have a wide perspective on their communities, local economies, and territories. They position themselves in these contexts and act as an agent to modify socio-economic factors, encourage cultural awareness of sustainability, and build social relationships. On the economic side, community co-operatives aim to create a “community economy” (Wilkinson & Quarter, 1996) that favours the economic growth of local actors through mutual benefit, avoiding exploitative dynamics. Community co-operatives work to make local assets useful and at the service of both residents and other businesses in a perspective of mutual support and cohabitation in the same area (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Mori & Sforzi, 2018). Generally, the new cooperativism wave prefigures the creation

of local collective economic actors who are able to develop assets and means of production free from a profit-oriented and exploitative logic (Vieta, 2018). Therefore, Italian community co-operatives respond to these characteristics but they also take a further step in understanding the fundamental importance of framing economic activities within sustainable community development to face the contemporary challenges of depopulation of rural and mountain areas, the impact of business activities, and importance of adding social value to their products.

On the social development side, awareness of being part of the context where the co-operatives operate makes their members more conscious of the importance of fostering new models for sustainable development using the co-operative as an agency for this innovation (Dale & Sparkes, 2011). It is important to recognise how founders and co-operators act in their community as “catalytic personalities” (Selman & Parker, 1997, p. 180), whose personality and leadership speed up processes of collective thinking about sustainable community development. They interact with and within diverse organisations and institutions to set local agendas with goals related to sustainable development. In particular, they implement these strategies positioning the community co-operatives into networks of collaboration (becoming “super-networkers” — Selman & Wragg, 1999) and as key players for local development. This is also a remarkable aspect of the new cooperativism movement that fosters social awareness about the re-thinking of economic models in society (Vieta, 2016). Moreover, the Italian community co-operatives also share a trend of new cooperativism towards managing local commons for the general interest (Ridley-Duff, 2020).

The development of social capital with other actors — third sector, public authorities, businesses or residents — determines the multi-stakeholder governance of these organisations. This is a key element that both Vieta (2010; 2018) and Ridley-Duff (2020) point to as a primary characteristic of the new cooperativism. Indeed, co-operators consider the engagement with other stakeholders — e.g. non-member workers, local partners, and customers — as a key part of their community development. This evolves in networks with other local subjects that allow the co-operatives to understand needs and issues, as well as, to input easily their proposals and innovations such as strategies for sustainable development. It is possible to say for Italian community co-operatives that “[s]uch socially embedded organizations address their community needs, while being managed by the community for the community” (Lamprinakos, 2020, p. 13). Consequently, Italian community co-operatives might consider implementing forms of community and sustainable accountability (Maddocks, 2019) to make local stakeholders and partners more aware of the role of these co-operatives in fostering sustainable community development and making an impact on the communities both in terms of outputs and more sensibility on this topic. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that, as researchers, we have to handle carefully the overrepresentations and consider that it is usually small groups of residents, with social capital and common values and visions, that act as community leaders to guide the co-operatives and the community development processes (Bianchi, 2021a).

## Conclusion

Italian community co-operatives proved themselves to be fundamental players at the local level to implement new models of sustainable community development. They bring many innovations in terms of a new perspective on community development work and add value to the concept of new cooperativism.

First, they represent an innovation of the traditional co-operative model because they have evolved this into a new practice of enlarging the sharing of mutual benefit — potentially — to all members of their communities. In doing this, they point out the necessity of re-thinking local development using new landmarks such as the 17 SDGs through which they interpret local issues as an opportunity to design new solutions that consider existing resources (abandoned or under-used assets). Italian community co-operatives combine economic activities with sustainable and social development for their communities; they achieve this thanks to social capital — relationships based on trust, collaboration, and reciprocity — that help them to

connect with other local actors and enhance a common project, not for exploitative profit but for community wealth and well-being.

Furthermore, as suggested by the interpretation of results and the literature, these organisations are part of the new cooperativism wave; they bring into this movement a perspective on sustainable community development because they are grassroots organisations that coexist with their socio-economic contexts and communities. It is an area that requires further exploration and a limitation of this particular study is the absence of further verification of data and interviewees' perspectives. This could be achieved through additional fieldwork and interviews but the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic limitations and limited time did not allow this.

## The Author

Michele Bianchi's main areas of research are community development, social enterprises, and co-operatives. He holds a Master degree in Social Work (University of Trento, Italy) and obtained his PhD in Sociology of Governance, Social Participation, and Citizenship at the University Carlo Bo (Urbino, Italy). In 2018, he was visiting PhD at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto). Between 2020 and 2021 he worked as a postdoc researcher at the Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health — Glasgow Caledonian University. Since 2021, he has been part of the MATILDE Horizon 2020 project in the University of Parma team.

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## Appendix: Participants and main information

Interview	Members	Year founded	Type	Region	Main activities
1	84	2018	Co-operative for services	Abruzzo	Accommodation Agriculture Social support Tourism
2	230	2017	Co-operative for services	Puglia	Accommodation Agriculture Environment protection Tourism
3	15	2015	Co-operative of work and production	Liguria	Accommodation Leisure activities Tourism
4	30	2013	Social co-operative	Liguria	Cultural activities Educational Activities Management of a public space
5	8	2020	Social co-operative	Campania	Accommodation Food service Migrant integration
6	7	2013	Agriculture co-operative	Lazio	Agriculture
7	63	2019	Co-operative for service	Emilia-Romagna	Food service Retail Tourism
8	12	2018	Agriculture Co-operative	Piemonte	Agriculture Environment protection Food service Migrant integration
9	97	2020	Tourism	Sicilia	Cultural activities Tourism
10	17	2019	Social co-operative	Campania	Management of a public space Migrant integration
11	66	2019	Co-operative of work and production	Calabria	Retail
12	19	2019	Social co-operative	Lombardia	Agriculture Environment protection Migrant integration
13	8	2017	Social co-operative	Campania	Accommodation Migrant integration Social support Transportation
14	96	2018	Co-operative of work and production	Abruzzo	Accommodation Agriculture Environment protection Tourism activities
15	15	1998	Co-operative of work and production	Piemonte	Construction Renovation
16	10	2020	Co-operative of work and production	Piemonte	Accommodation Management of a museum and wellness centre Tourism activities
17	9	2019	Agriculture co-operative	Piemonte	Agriculture Environment protection Migrant integration