

## Schwerpunkt „Bausteine einer Wissenschaft von der Gemeinwohlokonomie“

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### “We want to change realities here.” Motivations of actors in social agriculture fighting organized crime in Southern Italy

#### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag basiert auf 20 Tiefeninterviews mit verantwortlichen Akteur\*innen von Sozialgenossenschaften, Konsortien und Netzwerken der Sozialen Landwirtschaft in vier süditalienischen Regionen, welche stark durchdrungen sind von organisierter Kriminalität.

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Sie stellt folgende Fragen:

Wer sind die Akteur\*innen welche mit ihrer Arbeit eine Kultur der Legalität gegen das organisierte Verbrechen verbreiten wollen und welche Motivationen treiben sie? Welche Strategien wenden Sie in diesem herausfordernden Feld an? Welche unterstützenden und verhindernden Faktoren erfahren sie?

**Stichworte:** Die Sozial-ökonomische Situation des ländlichen Südens Italiens; Soziale Landwirtschaft; nicht-materielle Motivationen von Akteur\*innen in der sozialen Ökonomie; lokale Akteur\*innen des sozialen Wandels

#### Summary

This contribution bases on 20 in-depth interviews with leading actors of social cooperatives, consortia and networks of social agriculture in four disadvantaged South Italian regions, interstratified by organized crime. The research was conducted between September 2019 and March 2020. The core questions are: i) who are the actors and which motivations drive them? ii) which strategies did they practice? Iii) what kind of supporting and pushback factors did they experience?

**Keywords:** Socio-economic situation in rural southern Italy; social agriculture; non-material motivations of actors in social economy; local change agents;

“For us, it was important to start with a project for the endogenous growth of the Mezzogiorno, an idea of cultural change and of cultivating, because culture and agriculture here are one.” (Interview No. 10, vice-president of a Campanian social cooperative)

#### Introduction

Southern Italy suffers under poverty, emigration of qualified young people and a problematic demographical change. The precarious living conditions nourishes organized crime, even if over a period of more than 50 years, Italy has gained considerable experience in counteracting mafia-organizations with legal instruments and

multilayer-strategies. Legal prosecutions, however, are not sufficient to initiate change, even if they are indispensable preconditions. A sustainable change requires for destroying the consensus that organized crime has in a territory by creating self-sustained economic alternatives and a culture of legality. Social agriculture as a multifunctional approach has a high potential to reach this aim. Practicing social agriculture as a countervailing activity in disadvantaged regions of the Italian South contaminated by organized crime, however, asks for a high degree of resilience, strategic capacity and political support. There is a growing number of dedicated actors in the field of social farming, who tackle this task despite the fact, that social farming with high social and cultural aims under the described conditions, cannot promise monetary benefit.

## The misery of the Italian South

Southern Italy suffers from a high poverty-rate, unemployment, emigration and a problematic demographical change. The roots of the misery are historical (Giordano, 1992). There is no country other than Italy, in which 40.8% of its territory, the Mezzogiorno, and 34.2% of the national population, has a per capita income equal to 56% of that of the remaining part of the state (Panetta 2019). The agricultural sector mirrors this discrepancy between the two Italian macro-areas. The report on Agriculture in southern Italy, published by Ismea (2018) shows, that the level of value added per employee of the northern farms is 50% higher than that of workers in the South. Over the last decades, other worrying factors such as irregular work and exploitation of migrants have increasingly delineated the face of the southern agricultural sector, which is mostly oriented to large-scale distribution. This phenomenon is not endemic to the South however, since it is estimated, that in the whole country, the irregularity rate in agricultural employment reaches 39% (FLAI-CGIL 2018).

The report of the Italian National Institute of Statistics about poverty (ISTAT 2019) indicates the poverty rate for the Italian South shows a problematic socio-economic situation: 15,7% of young people live in a situation of absolute poverty in these regions. One out of two persons between 18 and 32 is unemployed or searching for a first employment. Between 2002 and 2017, 852.000 citizens left the southern regions, under which 612.000 young people (15-34) and 240.000 of them with an academic degree (SUD 2030, 16). Following the actual plan of the Ministry for the South and the territorial cohesion (Piano SUD 2030, February 2020), the total amount of public investment in the southern regions declined between 2008 and 2018 from 21 to 10.3 billion € (SUD 2030, 4).

The precarious living conditions nourished historically organized crime. The societal situation, can be named as “wild liberalism” (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2016, 17), which emerges under conditions, where people live under conditions of unemployment, poverty and a lack of perspectives and in which state-control is

scarce. Simultaneously, organized crime has dominated the life of people in these regions. The project coordinator of a Sicilian social cooperative expresses it in the following way: *“If there were real work and economic emancipation of people in Sicily, it would be difficult for mafia to rule here.”* (Interview No. 4). The socioeconomic system is in dependency relations from illegal actors, slowing down development and encouraging the exodus of those, who do not adopt to their conditions. The president of a social cooperative in Calabria explains the necessity of a cultural change as condition for economic development. *“The difficult context is not an economic one only, but first of all a cultural one.”* (Interview No. 6)

*“The Ndrangheta threatens not only directly, but creates also strong pressure against those, who want to disconnect. There are those who dare to do it, but it is not easy.”* (Interview No. 12.). Mafia organizations have gained massive economic, political and cultural power, creating dependencies for individuals, families, enterprises and public institutions, thereby influencing all areas of civic life. They have the “ability to use social ties and networks to construct a social consensus which allows them to produce, uncontested, illegal wealth for their affiliates” (Mosca 2018, 119). The president of a Calabrian social cooperative describes the helplessness of the local population: *“There is such a strong sentiment of inferiority, that also projects that could be implemented are seen as unrealizable. The work to do first is on the foundations, you have to dig at the socio-cultural conditions of these phenomena, and you find subservience and incapacity to be actors of change.”* (Interview No 6). The vice-president of a Campanian social cooperative: *“There is a concept of “meridionalism”, a condition of psychological subservience, which leads to the thinking, that nothing is changeable, not even a bit.”* (Interview 10)

Mafia-organizations control agriculture along the whole supply, because the percentage of value added by shadow economy in agriculture is higher than in other sectors (Marchetti, 2019, 47). The Italian National Antimafia Direction reports, that the turnover of agro-mafia in 2015 was 12.5 billion euro (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2016, 19). Actual inspection by the national Italian research institute Eurispes detected, that organized crime is a growing phenomenon in the most important productive sector connected with the primary needs of millions of people (Eurispes 2020).

## Italy's efforts to create a legal frame against the agro-mafia

Over a period of more than 50 years, Italy has gained considerable experiences in counteracting mafia-organizations through the development of legal means and multilayer- and multi-actor strategies, strongly based on local social cooperatives. Since 1965, a law allows the Italian state to expropriate illegally acquired goods, transferring them to local communities for social aims (Santino 2006). Legal prosecutions alone, however, cannot lead to a change, even if they are indispensable preconditions. A real change requires for destroying the consensus that mafia has in a

territory. It is necessary to implement concerted development programs, which promote respect for democratic rules and public institutions.

A strong movement to initiate such a change emerged in the mid of the 1990s. “Libera, Associations, names and numbers against mafias”, a network of diverse national, regional and local organizations, the cooperative sector, unions and associations (Santino 2009, 412) was born in 1995. The strategy of Libera is a model of involving “a variety of local players, which collaboratively pursue a common interest, namely the defeat of the mafia.” (Mosca 2018, 121). Law no. 109 introduced in 1996, regulated the assignment of confiscated property for public interests such as security, justice, employment, social protection or social services. It underlines that confiscated goods should serve to restore a social, legal and democratic order that serves the common good. To organize the complicated processes in a transparent and effective way, in 2010, Italy founded the national agency for the administration and allocation of confiscated goods (Agenzia Nazionale per l'amministrazione e la destinazione dei Beni Sequestrati e Confiscati alla criminalità organizzata, ANBSC).

## The potential of multifunctional social agriculture

Mafia organizations must be confronted especially in the place, in which they act (Iovino, 2016). To enter this context with the intention to develop local economies for legal income, social integration and employment, however, is a challenging project, which must accomplish more and other objectives than economic effort alone. Such an undertaking asks for a multiple and interrelated approach, able to reach the social and cultural tissue of the territory.

In August 2015, Italy was the first European country that passed a law for the promotion of social agriculture. This implies a strong advancement also for the anti-mafia movement. The combination of agricultural activities with social-, educational and healthcare objectives is a strategy, able to preserve jobs and create income opportunities, while providing services to the community and contributing to sustainable rural development. To underline the political will and priorities, in February 2018, the Italian Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry and Aliments (MIPAAF), the agency for agricultural allocation (Agea) and the national agency ANBSC, signed a declaration for the involvement of social agriculture in the management of goods, confiscated from mafia. (SIPROMI 2019, 18).

Social agriculture as a sector-transgressing multi-functional approach has the potential to create conditions for a sustainable change at local level. It is not only the immanent multi-functionality of the concept, but the aim is also to build legal alternatives within this basic economic context and by this, demonstrating that it is possible. Predominantly, social agriculture is organized in local cooperatives following the Italian law of 1991. Due to the horizontal structure of cooperatives, these are especially suitable to counteract traditional power-relations that support mafia-organizations (Giordano, 1992; Giarè, Borsotto, De Vivo et.al. 2020). Social cooperati-

ves are especially appropriate for this field and allow for interesting experiments by merging agricultural production with social, educational, cultural, ecological and political objectives.

As a sector-transgressing approach, social agriculture can create new combinations and synergetic local solutions. The understanding of agriculture as a multi-functional approach is a leading principle for the future of agriculture and rural areas in general (Wilson, 2007, 234). It bases on the understanding of rural transition as a holistic process, concerning not only economic and political but also social, ecological and cultural aspects. The vice-president of a Campanian social cooperative points out: *“Starting with social agriculture means, tying with the dimensions of community relations, with reciprocity, those relations from which interpersonal trust emerges. Agriculture, for us means having and creating an idea of community. We use the traditional term “cumparete” to give sense to the idea of agricultural production based on shared and collaborative community relationships. (...) It is a cultural vision which stands behind the idea of a new rurality, which is also a new community.”* (Interview No. 10).

Actors in social agriculture are community-development-agents but also agricultural innovators and ecological transformers. Organic and biodynamic cultivation methods are dominant practices in social agriculture as they are best suited to social activities with target groups of social- and health-care services. According to the report published by the Italian Rete Rurale Nazionale (Giarè, Borsotto, De Vivo et.al. 2017) on social agriculture in Italy, almost 70% of the examined initiatives (N = 367) adopt organic or biodynamic farming methods. The Italian association for biological agriculture (AIAB) underlines the complementarity of social and ecological motivations of actors in social agriculture, who demonstrate an attitude committed to the common good (AIAB, 2007).

Besides the creation of employment, social integration of disadvantaged people, the productive use of local assets and other socio-economic, cultural and ecological effects, above all, the return of young, qualified people, who commit to their territory and develop new local economies with a high moral claim, is the most promising signal for the region and the local community. *“We want to contribute to changing things here, if not, the young ones go away, and the old logic will stay.”* (Interview No. 3).

## Trying to understand local realities: in-depth interviews with southern Italian actors in social agriculture

Between September 2019 and April 2020, we identified social cooperatives, associations, and cooperative consortia in the field of Social Agriculture combatting organized crime in the southern Italian regions of Sicily, Calabria, Campania and Apulia. Our interest was to get in contact with actors, who try to build up social agri-

culture, providing subsistence, employment and future perspectives to local people while counteracting organized crime.

We conducted 20 in-depth interviews with founders, members and responsible actors of these structures. Most of our interviewees work on goods confiscated from Mafia-organizations. Even if some of them refuse to do that, because they fear reactions by organized crime on site or the turning away of intimidated local people, all of them aim to promote a culture of legality and create employment, facilitating a cultural change and the development of local economy in the area where they act.

The process of interviewing was highly demanding, so that we had to organize it in iterative processes. After a first interview and its transcription, in most cases, we conducted follow up interviews at least once to clarify and deepen issues and within these repetitive cycles, new aspects or considerations arose. We contacted some of the interviewees up to four times and this was not only investigation but also investment in trust building. Relevant and sensitive information such as the reasons why the actors prefer embeddedness in supra-regional networks to foster their local economy or the description of concrete aggression against persons or production facilities only came out within the second or third dialogue. The construction of a communicative base in the form of an authentic, safe and dialogic relationship between the interviewees and the researchers is essential. In our field, research can gain access to information that can be potentially damaging to the interviewed actors or to their organization (Kirby, Greaves and Reid 2010).

### **“We want to change realities here” – the power of non-economic motivation**

The cooperatives we detected within our research are bottom-linked and driven by ambitious civil society actors. They demonstrate the power of local economies, which are innovative experiments (Moulaert & MacCallum 2019) based on multi-functionality, new actors in the agricultural sector, new relationships, new methods and new combinations of institutional arrangements. Most of them started as informal groups, associations or projects. They practice a mix of different kinds of work ranging from paid labor, social action and voluntary engagement within a broad field of diverse activities such as agricultural production, qualification, processing, marketing, social work and innovative social policy, direct marketing, political action, networking, unlocking new markets, cultural events and communication. This mirrors their pioneering role in a multifunctional field. Their precarious situation is an everyday experience caused by lacking material means and political support, pushback and violent experiences as well as administrative barriers. The embeddedness in local and supra-regional networks of actors who share their values, is essential for their implementation, survival and development.

Thus, these actors are not classical social entrepreneurs, applying economic approaches to social problems (Duncan, 2009) alone. Their aim is much more complex.

They want to initiate processes of comprehensive social, economic and cultural change and development by building up economic structures, despite expected pushbacks and the lack of material as well as immaterial pre-conditions. They are change-agents and community-developers, creating the power to act within the process of acting in planned change (Gamble & Weil, 2009). The president of a Calabrian social cooperative describes the aim of their work as follows: *“The objective is to create a space of shared values, which aggregates the community around certain ideals. To realize this, there was the conviction that an economic project would be required.”* (Interview No. 7)

Considering, that social agriculture under the difficult conditions in southern Italy cannot promise high monetary benefit, even if the cooperatives must be economically self-sustained, the main driving motivations must be non-economic ones. The director of a social cooperative in Campania expresses it in the following way: *“Here, even earning 500€ for a young person is a lot. There are social educators or psychologists with a diploma, who work for 600€ in a full-time job.”* (Interview No. 1) The president of a social cooperative in Apulia confirms this: *“I still have difficulties to bring home a stipend. I have to earn it outside with some small projects and training days.”* (Interview 13.).

To understand the driving power, we refer to the comprehensive concept of human scale economies, drafted by the development economist Manfred Max-Neef (1986). It bases on a theory of human needs and aspirations integrating the human needs of being, having, doing and interacting. Max-Neef’s classification demonstrates on the one hand, the interconnection of these needs and on the other hand, those of subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, creation, leisure, identity and freedom as satisfiers (Max-Neef 1992). Following this concept, it makes a fundamental difference *how* needs are satisfied. Buying vegetables as economic goods or producing and harvesting them in a social cooperative have completely different qualities, related to needs-satisfaction and to the possible contribution to individual well-being and social capacity building. Satisfiers relate to forms of organization, values, rules and social practices. Actors in a community-based cooperative for example, work in a specific setting, built by norms of cooperation and common aims, ownership, rights and obligations. The balance between needs, satisfiers and economic goods is an important equation for the creation of community-based local economies. Operating in self-contained productive niches, like in social agriculture, can open endogenous and synergetic satisfiers. In this context, fundamental needs are not only goals, but can become drivers of rural development. Synergetic satisfiers are those, which in the way they satisfy a given need, stimulate and contribute to the simultaneous satisfaction of other needs. They can generate concrete material effects, but also knowledge, understanding, social participation, freedom from market dependencies, resilient communities, affection or identity (Elsen, 2019).

While the conception of Max-Neef can explain predominantly the individual motivations of actors, the analysis of the specific common situation of these actors in value-based associations, suggests another explanation. The shared value-base, mutuality and cooperation in the common position against the external antagonist, create bonding social capital (Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993) which generates social cohesion, mutual trust and common responsibility for the shared concerns. This basis also stimulates linking social capital, facilitating connection with other associations, networks and organizations that share the value base and therefore can be potential strategical and ideological partners for common objectives.

### Pioneering spirit and awareness for the special feature

It is obvious, that the cooperative engagement of the interviewees is based on most of the non-material satisfiers, defined by Max-Neef: affection, understanding, participation, creation, identity and freedom in processes of doing, interacting and being. They are aware of acting in an extraordinary context. Many of them define their work as a kind of forerunning function. The president of a consortium in Calabria describes the mission of their work: *“We had to demonstrate, that this model, in miniature, is not only ideal, but also possible. We wanted to show, that, without ndrangheta, you are not only protected, but that you can also earn more than before and this in a legal way.”* (Interview No. 11)

Being pioneers in a sector-transgressing and multifunctional field means, to play diverse roles (Christopoulos & Vogl 2015) and to cope with different requirements. Such a situation asks for a high level of personal capabilities, adaptabilities and resilience. Pioneers in the described context write the screenplay while acting in their diverse roles. The pioneering spirit emerges from the conviction of fighting for the right cause, a common experience, which creates power to act and cohesion between the involved actors. *“Our experience is that of a movement. We work here, where the exploitation is strongest. We are activists, believing in what we do, and our values are more important than money.”* (Interview No. 12). 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 (Johnston H. and Klandermans B. 1995).

Thus, there is a high awareness related to the peculiarity and the societal impact of the work within the context. The president of a social cooperative in Campania: *“The experiment of the cooperative is to reach an objective, which goes beyond the employment of the members. If this message does not arrive, it will be absorbed by another picture and trust will be destroyed completely.”* (Interview No. 1). 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, 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.” (Interview N. 8) Constructing a diverse and responsible economy is the central task for all the actors we interviewed. “For us, it’s important to create an ecological and ethical chain. These two words go together because they reject the exploitation-idea of the big distributors and land-owners.” (Interview No. 8)*

## **Autonomy, self-actualization and organizational culture**

The experience of being a pioneer in a unique development-context is coherent with the sense of self-actualization, as a strong basis of personal motivation (Germak & Robinson 2014) but also as a base for common and cooperative acting. *“I love this work, experimenting, doing new things. I want to translate into practice, what I have studied.” (Interview Nr. 1) The Apulian president of a social cooperative underlines the personal importance of meaningful work within this challenging context: “Let’s say, it was an opportunity to reflect on the sense of work, if it were only to bring home bread or if there is another sense (...). Thus, I said to myself, that this is the moment to bring my values together with a job that is coherent with them.” (Interview No. 13).*

Other aspects emphasized by several interviewees are the autonomy, cooperation and self-organization in the working-context. Most of the interviewees have an age between 38 and 50 and most of them have already had experiences in other working-contexts, which they left by their own decision. It is obvious, that they searched for another working-culture and for sense in their life. The president of the Apulian network against exploitation of migrants in agriculture points out: *“Participation for us is a fundamental value. Without participation, we would not manage to realize our ideas. (...) What we have created in these years in complete autonomy and in total self-organization shows us, that we can even reach more. (...) We are our own boss. We do not have secure earnings but a lot of emotional satisfaction. (...) Thanks to the reputation we are gaining all over Italy, our members are researchers, teachers, students and all can express their vote. We want a strong democratic experience.” (Interview 8).*

Autonomy, dignity and freedom in their own working-context as well as for that of the members of the target-groups are high values also for the project coordinator of a Sicilian social cooperative: *“We have to and we want to stay in an autonomous way in the market, but with the objective to contribute to the growth of the community.”* Freedom for the members of the target-group is a central objective: *“Before, they were precarious or worked informally for strawmen of the mafia, depending on them and this is what creates the subservience of people. If you depend on someone, you must bow your head. Now they have regular contracts, and no one asks them to do other than good work.” (Interview No. 4) Dignified labor for disadvantaged persons against the practice of “parking” unemployed people is an important aim also for an Apulian social cooperative in the field of social agriculture for labor-integration. “We understand labor as social emancipation and that’s another thing.” (Interview No. 13)*

The president of a Campanian social cooperative describes the horizontal culture of the labor organization: *“Within the working plan all of us knead the pastry, the social worker and the users. (...) Within the group, the social worker is not the social worker, but the person who knows how to make the pastries and the young users see him as nothing else than a member of the group.”* (Interview 1). This is a remarkable aspect, which characterizes emancipatory social work in this context. It underlines empowerment and democratic rules in social work and interprets the role of social workers as facilitators and social innovators. The president of an Apulian social cooperative underlines this aspect of social innovation and emancipatory social work: *“Thanks to social agriculture, new profiles of welfare emerge. There are disadvantaged persons in the welfare system, able to work, and this work gives them dignity. They do not only earn economic income, but produce gains for the community ...”* (Interview No. 13)

### Spiritual, social and political values

Shared values seem to be the strongest ties between the members of the core group as well as between them and their cooperating and supporting environment. It is the sealant keeping the members of the core-group together and linking them with actors, who share these attitudes and support the value-based development of the project. Some of the realities, we investigated, are rooted in the work of the local parish and in the experiences, the founders made in a Christian youth group. The president of a social cooperative in Calabria reports: *“The cooperative grew out of a group of youngsters of a parish in the periphery, people who grew up together with very strong ties of friendship. Our dream was, to create something together which would enable us to grow together and to create something positive for the territory. (...) In the South, parishes are one of the few islands of legality and social transformation. (...) Today, we are adults and many of us have moved away for work. The core group of about ten of the founders however, remained as volunteers – to talk about the power that connects us. (...) The garden is an emotional laboratory, where you can experience exertion while cultivating the ground, the waiting, the caring and the joy of harvesting: This is a value that goes beyond spirituality, it is human in general. (...) I think that working on the dimension of a value-based community is fundamental in this territory.”* (Interview 7).

A similar personal background and motivation is that of the president of a Campanian social cooperative: *“I have always been an activist in young left-wing grassroots movements. (...) These were very strong community-experiences which gave me a lot: friendship, passion, willingness to act and the conviction, that it is possible to change realities, overall, maybe this is the most important thing.”* (Interview No. 1)

The powerful Calabrian consortium GOEL of about 40 cooperatives, farms and voluntary organizations emerged from the activities of the Catholic Church. This consortium with its broad network represents a strong countervailing power, utili-

zing efficient strategies to distribute a culture of legality also involving small farmers who try to disconnect from *ndrangheta*. The president of the consortium: *“The base is, that ethics can be a formidable driver of economic development. Our consortium is an organization with a cultural-political objective which utilizes the enterprise to legitimize an ethical position which says, that it is better to stay on the legal side than on the illegal one and that staying on the side of emancipation is better than being a servant.”* (Interview No. 11)

A group of Calabrian left-wing actors of a social cooperative tends to counteract exploitation of migrant workers in the agricultural sector. The president explains: *“This is a social cooperative for labor integration which emerged from the wish to improve the labor-conditions of the day-laborers (braccianti) and to contribute to their release from the difficulties related to the seasonal dependency of harvesting in the period between October and April. (...) Ours is a political activity. The production is a means to make politics. Our philosophy is mutualism to the inside and to the outside. (...)”* (Interview No. 12).

Political conviction is also the pillar of an Apulian network against exploitation in agriculture. *“The network integrates groups that share an anticapitalistic project and that supports a model of conflictual mutualism which foresees the connection between production, reproduction and the circulation of goods between producers and consumers. (...) The perspective is, to create an alternative to capitalism.”* (Interview No. 8, president of the network).

## Relatedness to the home territory

The responsibility for the future of the place, in which these change agents operate, plays a central role. The director of an Apulian network against exploitation of migrants in agriculture explains her understanding of their work: *“We are activists, fighting against injustice. (...), if everybody goes away, only ruins will remain here in some years. The perception, that the North has of the South is wrong and it has no idea how difficult it is, to build a society even minimally civilized and functioning.* (Interview No. 8).

The coordinator of a Campanian social cooperative expresses the following statement. *“What we want to realize with our work is a cultural transformation of the territory where our activities can represent a sort of antibody against the many years of violence and lack of rights it has suffered. Our work emerged from a territorial experience in which 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.”* (Interview No. 5)

The coordinator of a social cooperative for labor-integration of people with mental distress, which is part of a bigger consortium, describes the community-development–approach of their work: *“The consortium follows the principle objective of foste-*

*ring the civil growth of the territory by involving community members in a process of social and cultural change, out of criminality. However, the activities we conduct as a consortium cannot be executed as simple counter-positions against criminality, but as a work for the rights of persons, especially disadvantaged persons.” (Interview No. 5).*

The embeddedness in the territory, the wish to find meaningful employment and to contribute to local development was the starting point of a social cooperative in Campania. The vice-president explains: *“We are all very much connected with the territory. Here, there is still a strong sense of being rooted and there are still forms of community, which in other parts have vanished. (...). Here, there are still small villages with a growing share of elderly, with a very fragile economy but with some forms of resistance as community. (...) For us, the question was, to find employment but with a sense of restoration for this territory. We met as a group of friends and discussed this. For us, it was important to start with a project for the endogenous growth of the Mezzogiorno, an idea of cultural change and of cultivation, because culture and agriculture here are one.” (Interview No. 10)*

## **Strategies of implementation, stabilization and organizational structures**

The processes of implementation, anchoring and enhancements of the cooperatives and networks we investigated, demonstrate a high level of load capacity, social innovation, reflexive development strategies and involvement. There is a lot to learn from these fearless pioneers related to the distribution of countervailing thinking and acting and building up self-sustained economic structures. The project coordinator of a Calabrian social cooperative, which is member of the consortium Libera Terra explains the general strategy of this consortium: *“...only by a socially responsible and economically stable way to work with the confiscated land, it is possible to intervene into the power of the mafia and distribute a culture of legality as well at the social and at the institutional level.” (Interview No. 3).*

There are many innovative strategies that the change agents apply in the productive part of their work to develop an economic base by developing new combinations. The president of a Calabrian social cooperative explains: *“With agriculture alone you cannot take off: (...) The catering-project was born two years ago. It is called “Miscita” (mix), that means, mixing tastes of cuisines of different cultures and trying to innovate the Calabrian cuisine by mixing it with the African, and in the same logic of bringing together and mixing persons.” (Interview No. 9)* Qualitative innovation is one of the widespread strategies of implementation, utilized by many of the interviewees: *“Having invested into the quality of the products was a fundamental way for us. We have restored traditional grapes and presented our wine at international exhibitions and we have been among the first to cultivate biological crops.” (interview No. 4)*

The political and economic Calabrian anti-ndrangheta consortium GOEL utilizes intelligent communication strategies to prove wrong the conviction of the local po-

pulation, that without ndrangheta nothing functions in the territory. They scrutinize the consensus-base of the local population with organized crime, on which its power depends. The consortium emerged from social pastoral work aimed at a systematic socio-economic change and an emancipation from the dependencies from organized crime by convincing the population, that ndrangheta is the principle enemy of the community. *“The strategy we choose was (...) the destruction of consensus with ndrangheta-organizations by moral discourses. The problem, however, is, that ndrangehta doesn't care about such messages. However, ndrangheta always has been very attentive to social acceptance. People are convinced that without it, nothing would work, and this is true because a big part of the economy depends on it, this means jobs, support, recommendations. The real point is not to say, that ndrangheta is evil but rather, that it is the wrong approach, that they are a bluff, that it is not true, that they help, but that they impoverish and that not by accident, Calabria is the poorest region in Europe. (...) One of the slogans we use is that while ndrangheta prides itself to be the first Mafia in the world, and effectively it is, our region is the last, related to economy and occupation in Europe.” (Interview N.11).*

Coalition building between actors who share common values with the consortium and the involvement of actors, who are still anchored in dependencies of organized crime, is the second effective strategy of the consortium to implement and distribute countervailing thinking, alternatives and power. The Calabrian consortium includes 12 social cooperatives, 29 farms, a foundation, 2 commercial cooperatives and 2 voluntary organizations. This is a broad fundament for ethical alternatives. Besides its own activities, the consortium offers support to small enterprises that intend to disconnect from ndrangheta. The president: *“It's a special story in agriculture because it emerges from the call for support of the farmers who are threatened by the ndrangehta. (...). We want to demonstrate, that who goes against ndrangehta is protected, but also earns more in a legal manner than before.” (Interview N. 11)*

The connected power of the consortium together with the communicative capacity are effective means. *“The ndrangheta has learned from cosa nostra, to stay under cover. We, with our communication office are a war-machine and if something happens, we inform the whole of the world and television and people from other regions and national politics will arrive. This creates an uncomfortable situation for the ndrangheta and farmers will notice that. They come to us and we create a farmer cooperative with them.” (Interview 11)*

As a third approach of this consortium, we can identify the strategic utilization of ethical values as a competitive benefit. *“To be competitive, until some time ago, you either had to lower prizes or to improve quality. Today, there is also a third way and that's the competition in the demand for meaning. If you put ethics as a constitutive element of the process and the product within certain limits of the prize, you can win the competition in a growing part of the market.” (Interview No. 11).*

Another strategy to stabilize the economic structure and to create independence from market pressure, dumping and predatory competition is the development of own direct marketing chains by networking predominantly with supra-regional organizations, a strategy, applied by several social cooperatives we interviewed. *“From the beginning, we worked on the processing of the products, to enter the markets of northern Italy with our regional specialties, such as pickled eggplants, tomato sauces or jelly.”* (Interview No. 6). Others collaborate with the organization “Slow”, “Altro Mercato”, solidarity purchase-groups (GAS) or with the distribution network of Libera Terra for direct marketing, avoiding intermediary trade and wholesalers.

The South Italian movement of social agriculture against organized crime within recent years gained a lot of attention and appreciation from many national and international groups. Many of the organizations cooperate with Universities, schools, churches, civil-society activists and, as mentioned before, with eco-social consumers and solidarity purchase groups. This connection with allies, who share the concerns, is an effective way, on the one hand, to disseminate the culture of legality, and, on the other, to create a supportive environment for the countervailing actors. The project-development coordinator of a Calabrian social cooperative explains: *“...also educational programs in collaboration with schools, the church and the associations were conducted with the conviction, that to combat mafia-criminality it is necessary, to construct a widespread culture of legality to destroy the principle weapon of mafia, the isolation of those, who combat it.”* (Interview No. 4)

Alternative touristic offers also serve this idea. Many volunteer-groups participate in work camps or in collective harvesting. The Calabrian coordinator of a social cooperative: *“Every year, until today, Libera organizes work camps for volunteers and within these twenty years, thousands of young people from all parts of Italy have come to help with the harvest and with our work. That’s very important, because we do not feel so alone and especially mafia knows, that we are not alone.”* (Interview No. 4)

## Support and pushback factors

Nearly all interviewees experienced different forms of pushback and even violence, which they outflank in diverse ways, but they receive also support and solidarity. One piece of information related to confiscated goods emerged from different actors: *“We were one of the few projects, which have not been threatened or intimidated immediately. (...) The problem is that the territory was confiscated, and many are afraid to collaborate with us.”* (Interview No. 2)

The president of an Apulian social cooperative describes a similar situation: *The problem of criminality here in Puglia is very complex. There is not the visibility like in other regions if you talk about mafia, you think of Sicily, if you talk about ndrangheta of Calabria and of camorra in Napoli. There, you know what you are talking about also because historically there has been resistance. Here in Puglia it is not only Sacra Corona. There are ramified structures, which are invisible and there is no talking about it. But*

*the presence is very strong in many sectors and there is a lot of fear to talk about it. Therefore, in Puglia, working with confiscated goods started later with a lot of problems.” (Interview No. 13)*

Another testimonial of the in-depth effects of the contamination by organized crime is the experience of the Calabrian social cooperative, member of Libera Terra, in relation to the transfer of confiscated goods to legal utilization. *“Here it was not possible. The territory was confiscated from Mafiosi of the caliber of Riina (very famous Mafioso) and it was simply not imaginable to start with something alone. (...) Libera cooperated with Italia Sviluppo (public development agency) for an economic development plan. They organized a public advertisement for taking charge of it as cooperatives. There were about 15 candidates but when they understood what the assignment was, they withdrew.”* Related to the work of this social cooperative in Sicily she mentions: *“There were many episodes of intimidation: cutting the fresh vineyards, damage to work-material, but above all the trial of strong isolation. The territory is not very populated and in the evening there was a situation of fear. In the first years, almost no one wanted to collaborate, I speak of consumers and suppliers, still today we only sell a share of less than 10% in Sicily.” (interview No. 4)*

There are also other experiences. Some projects collaborate with traditional small agricultural actors on site. *“I must say that the farmers of this region are all supportive, following the farmers’ rule that one hand washes the other.” (interview No. 2)* The president of a Campanian social cooperative explains: *“The project is not easy to manage. (...) We are allied with farmers and small enterprises who process the agricultural products (...). There are some people who intend to donate small territories and uncultivated ground, because they begin to appreciate the work we do. Money donations arrive, most of them anonymously.”* She also underlines the difficulties that emerged when the Italian law related to the confiscation of illegal goods was put into practice: *“... but if I start from the position of a manager of confiscated territory – basta! that’s it! – people withdraw not only because they are afraid but maybe they think, now there is another one who wants to profit.” (Interview No. 1)*

The president of the Calabrian Goel consortium explains their effective communication-strategy against the damaging activities of ndrangheta: *“They tried it with vandalism and threatening, but our power is the very broad network of supporters and each time when something happened, hundreds of people mobilized either in Calabria or outside and ndrangheta fears nothing more than visibility.” (Interview No. 11)*

## Discussion and conclusion

Despite the excellent legal framework that Italy developed over a period of five decades, the single projects must find their own ways to accomplish their missions. The experiences they make and the strategies they choose in this process, are highly interesting for any planned change in a territorial context, which must be bottom linked, to reach the ground of dysfunctional realities. We must take into considera-

tion, that the intended historically grown, extensive and deep-reaching changes of socio-cultural phenomena discussed here, need a long time. The examples, we investigated, are important demonstrations for the possibility of this change, which are neglected also by parts of the local population. This perception of possible change however, is the inevitable base for a new narration of Italy's South.

There doesn't seem to be a systematic and general public support for the multifunctional activities besides the supportive relations and structures that have been constructed by these social cooperatives and networks themselves within their environment and by the horizontal structures between the organizations, such as consortia like Libera Terra or GOEL. The pioneers of social agriculture in the disadvantaged territories, contaminated by organized crime in these four regions, must not only build the economic foundations for their enterprise, but they also have to generate all the preconditions to implement it as a countervailing organization that intends to influence its environment with alternative ideas and practices.

Our interviews demonstrate the extraordinary ideals and motivations of these change agents. The questions that arise however are, how long can they sustain the work and how can these enterprises, based predominantly on idealistic motivations, and often self-exploitation of their actors, be maintained independently from them, and over a longer period? The experiences and strategies gained within the complex processes of conceptualization and implementation of the countervailing organizations provide a valuable base of knowledge and skills for planned change under challenging conditions.

The enterprises discussed are to be recognized in their societal multifunctionality and their contribution to democratic and civilized development. For these contributions they must be entitled to receive political and financial support and fiscal easing. Experienced actors should be inserted into the rural development plan for the South and into the comprehensive plan SUD 2030, that refers to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The actors of the cooperatives in social agriculture are experts for the claims and objectives of this plan such as politics of cohesion, inclusion, active citizenship and No-Mafia and they have many examples of best practice that can be made available for the implementation of the plan.

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