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The Role of Social Farming in the Socio-Economic Development of Highly Marginal Regions: An Investigation in Calabria

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Abstract: This paper focuses on social farming, a new “branch” which includes activities that make use of agricultural, rural and natural resources in order to produce food and social services. It investigates the case of Calabria, one of the least developed regions in Italy and in Europe, which suffers from several serious problems; for example, the low level of accessibility, and the presence of the Mafia organisations. We wondered whether in such a region social farming can make a significant contribution to its social and economic development. Using the data collected by means of a qualitative investigation of some of the most important Calabrian social farms, we studied their characteristics, their strategies, their social mission, and their role in the local socio-economic context. We found that most of them are successful, in both economic and social terms, and their role in the local community is positive. Moreover, they are making a valuable contribution to the cultural change required to overcome the predominance of the Mafia.

Keywords: agriculture; lagging region; isolation; Calabria; Mafia organisations; direct interview; thematic analysis

1. Introduction

Social farming is a recent and rapidly evolving phenomenon that has spread considerably in the most developed areas of the European continent. Consider, for example, that, in countries such as Holland, France, Belgium, Germany, as well as in Italy itself, the first surveys carried out in the last decade already revealed a significant presence of this phenomenon [1]. To date, in Italy, according to Giarè et al. [2], about 1200 occurrences of social agriculture have been registered.

It is a new and atypical “branch” to be placed in the context of the growing diversification and multifunctionalisation of the agri-food sector, a structural process that is responding to the ever wider and more complex needs of society, in terms of production, welfare, social and territorial cohesion [3–5].

Social farming can be defined as ‘an umbrella term for all those activities that make use of agricultural, rural and natural resources (plants, animals, the space and time of nature) in order to produce food and social services in both rural and peri-urban areas’ [6]. To use another definition, provided by the European Economic and Social Committee [7], social farming can be defined as ‘a cluster of activities that use agricultural resources—both animal and plant—to generate in rural or semi-rural areas, social services such as rehabilitation, therapy, sheltered jobs, lifelong learning and other activities contributing to social integration. In this sense, it is about—among other things—making farms places

where people with particular needs can take part in daily farming routines as a way of furthering their development, making progress and improving their well-being”.

Italian legislation, in particular Law 141/2015, states that agricultural entrepreneurs, in single or associated form, and social cooperatives with turnover deriving from agriculture that is their main activity, are defined as social farmers. Moreover, social cooperatives with agricultural turnover not dominant, but higher than 30% of the total, are also considered to be social farmers, in an amount corresponding to that share of their turnover [8]. Social farming in Italy is therefore defined by activities aimed at carrying out (art.2, co. 1):

- Socio-employment integration of disadvantaged workers and people
- Social services and activities for local communities
- Services in support of medical, psychological, and rehabilitation therapies, including using farm animals and growing plants
- Projects aimed at: safeguarding biodiversity, fostering environmental and food education and making the area known by organising social and educational farms

We would say that this is not merely a new form of multifunctionality of agriculture, aimed at linking the production of agricultural goods to the provision of services to people in rural areas. It is also, on the basis of the principles of the civil economy it incorporates [9], a form of agriculture strictly connected with a system of values focused on the production of common goods, on respect and on the enhancement of diversity, relational goods, food and ecological citizenship. It produces positive social and territorial externalities, thereby re-establishing the link between food and community, strengthening the social networks around food production, and generating environmental, economic, and social self-sustainability [10].

Its innovativeness also lies in the aims of the companies that operate there, including those of a social nature (e.g., the re-insertion of disadvantaged segments into employment), which join, and are combined with, the typical aims (profit) linked to the production activities carried out for the market [4]. As Di Iacovo et al. [11] argue, social farming covers a plurality of organisational and activity models, which involve not only agricultural enterprises and social cooperatives, but often also wider networks, with associations, public services, and the local community.

Such a new logic, such a new approach to agriculture, can definitely serve as a basis for an alternative model of economic development and society, in particular for the most disadvantaged areas, which are still struggling to define and find their own path and their own identity [12,13]. In these areas, the agri-food chain often represents one of the best “cards” in which to invest in order to be more competitive and grow [14]. The areas of Southern Italy, historically plagued by structural problems, some typical of marginal areas (periphery and isolation), others specific (the presence of organised crime), constitute in this sense an apparently fertile ground for experimenting with, and observing, new models of development.

The present work focuses on the investigation of a set of experiences of social farming in Calabria, one of the least developed and most depressed regions in the country [15], in order to explore whether this “branch” can develop in such a region, and can contribute to its future socio-economic development. The strictly economic dimension is analysed together with the social mission of these realities, with the ultimate objective of verifying whether in such a marginal region this new agricultural practice can actually contribute, even in embryo, to a new path of development capable of releasing many positive effects in the territory, economically, socially, and culturally. The paper therefore aims to fill the research gap existing with concern to the in-depth knowledge of this “branch” of agriculture in disadvantaged areas.

Clearly, we assume that social farming, even when highly developed, can hardly acquire an important weight in economic terms (even agriculture itself, in spite of its recent positive changes and trends in economic terms, still remains rather negligible at the macro-level compared with other sectors, like manufacturing and services). However, it is necessary to emphasise again that social

farming, being an activity with a wider meaning and value, and with diverse multiple implications (not only those linked to the production activities carried out for the market), can have important effects in places like Calabria that suffer from both low economic development and serious social and institutional issues, as we will see in Section 3. In this sense, the focus is also on certain critical issues (for example social farming and organised crime), which are decisive for its affirmation as a key 'sector' to relaunch areas like Calabria.

The research study follows, broadly speaking, a case study approach. In particular, it tries to develop an exploratory and instrumental type of case study [16,17]. Such a study comprises a three-fold methodological approach: An analysis of the existing literature on the subject of study; followed by an analysis of the case study context, which favours descriptive and quantitative elements; and, finally, a presentation and discussion of the most significant occurrences of social agriculture in Calabria, using a qualitative approach, in the data collection phase (direct surveys with face-to-face interviews), and data analysis (thematic analysis).

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 is dedicated to the literature on social farming, in particular as concerns its development in marginal areas. Section 3 presents the case study under investigation, centered on Calabria, providing in evidence factors and figures about its serious social and economic situation. Section 4 describes how the field investigation was conducted and the methodological approach adopted, and then presents and discusses the results of the investigation, as concerns the economic and social mission of the social farms, and the critical questions that social farming addresses in Calabria. Finally, we draw some conclusions and the lessons learnt from this case study.

2. Social Farming in Disadvantaged Regions: Elements from the Literature

Social farming, as a "branch" obviously located in rural areas, has inherently the potential to have an impact on the society and economy, especially in marginal and disadvantaged areas. However, the literature on social farming, in particular as regards marginal and disadvantaged areas with a low level of socio-economic development, appears to be very limited.

Based on Vigano and Musolino [12], who recently focused their attention on social farming especially in these areas, and Di Iacovo and O'Connor [10], who edited one of the most important studies on social farming in several Northern and Southern European countries, we identified five types of possible virtuous effects of social farming on these areas. First, it can limit the territorial dispersion in the provision of services, and the consequent inaccessibility to services, thereby creating proximity for users and responding in an innovative way to their needs, based on multifunctionality. Secondly, in these areas it strengthens relationships and networks, either formal or informal, involving users, producers, institutions, associations, local community, and so on [2]. In this way, it limits the 'natural' isolation which entrepreneurs and other actors normally experience in disadvantaged and marginal areas. In this respect, it can strengthen social capital in these areas, as it concerns 'community-based and community-oriented development approaches' [18] (p. 133), which emphasizes, and gives value, to concepts like gift and reciprocity. Thirdly, it improves the image and raises the reputation of products and services coming from these areas, as social farming creates a distinctive feature in many distribution channels that is appreciated by final consumers who are sensitive to ethical issues and environmental and social sustainability [10]. It is well known, for example, that social farming re-uses abandoned land, and uses land confiscated from Mafia organisations, as we explain later with regard to Calabria. Fourthly, social farms have positive effects on the landscape and environment (see, for example, the attitude to landscape maintenance of social farmers, and the high share of organic social farms) [18]. Lastly, needless to say, its development creates new job opportunities, not only for disadvantaged people but also for professionals, in areas where obviously the low level of employment is one of the most serious problems (see, for example, the two case studies in Southern Italy analysed by Giarè et al. [19], concerning the inclusion of migrants in social farms).

The only important and wide survey conducted in Italy on social farming [2,20] casts light on some of the basic characteristics of this new “phenomenon” in lagging regions. This survey has many limitations, so it cannot be taken as a systematic and reliable information source for evaluating its quantitative importance, but nevertheless it provides the base to depict a first picture of this phenomenon (obviously based on the Southern Italian disadvantaged regions).

Interestingly, in Southern Italy, social farming is less developed than in Central and Northern Italy, but even so there is a remarkable number of social farms: In total about 400, but only about 30 in Calabria. Southern social farms, as is usual for Italian social farms which follow what is called in Italian an “inclusive model” [19], have the social and work integration of disadvantaged workers and people as their main mission (about 32% of the total). Incidentally, in this respect, there is a clear difference with Northern European countries, where, instead, therapeutic activities (care farming) prevail [2,10].

The social support provided by Southern social farms covers several groups of disadvantaged people, but none of them is predominant: 16% of the assisted people are disabled, about 10% are drug addicts and children in problem families, detainees, and long-term unemployed people. Interestingly, these social farms are also able to establish linkages, connections, networks with local actors, as most of them have working relationships, and cooperate with other associations, farms, schools, social services, etc.

As far as production is concerned, the interesting point emerging from this survey is that social farms in Southern regions are rather diversified in terms of products and services (agri-tourism, restaurants, didactic farms, etc.). In particular, as concerns agriculture, they have a clear specialisation in organic farming, which is a sector on the increase in the national and international food markets [21]. However, these farms are often small, usually are not organised and technologically advanced, and nor are they particularly efficient and effective in sales and distribution (for example, they rarely do e-commerce, but are more often engaged in direct selling and farmers’ markets). This is probably why, in one case out of two, they invest in order to improve processes and products in social farming (especially buying equipment and machinery, improving buildings and plants, improving transport accessibility, planted trees and greenhouses), using, in one case out of three, their own funds.

The final impression obtained from these data is that, in spite of having some deficiencies, the Southern social farms have the ability to serve local communities, by providing a wide range of services and products.

3. The Case Study Area: Calabria, a Lagging Region in Southern Italy

Calabria is an Italian region (Figure 1), inhabited by 1,965,000 people, and is the 10th administrative NUTS2 region in Italy in terms of population. Calabria is located in Southern Italy (also known as the Mezzogiorno), the least developed macro-area in Italy, whose low level of development creates what is called the North-South divide, the most persistent and known characteristic of Italian socio-economic geography [22–26].

Within Southern Italy, Calabria is characterised by the worst socio-economic figures. The GDP per capita in 2017, for example, was about 17.1k euros, about half the average of the Central and Northern regions: And it has actually declined since 2011 [27]. The employment rate in the same year (2017) was 39.6%, while in Italy as a whole at that time it was 56.9%; though this indicator has declined in recent decades (43.1% in 2000) [15].



Figure 1. Geographical location of the case study area: Calabria. Source: Our own elaboration.

As a consequence of the scarce level of economic development and the high level of unemployment, the wealth of the resident population is low, and poverty is a relatively widespread phenomenon [28]. The relative poverty rate in 2017 was about 35%, while in Italy it was 12% and in Southern Italy 25% [29]. Demographic growth is no exception (<https://www.tuttitalia.it/calabria/statistiche/popolazione-andamento-demografico/>): From 2013 to 2018, the annual demographic growth was negative (from -0.2% to 0.5%). As Svimez underlined [15], Calabria is one of the Italian regions going through a kind of “human desertification” process.

Several factors, economic, social, institutional, and cultural, can explain such a low level of development, as is also shown by the wide literature on the development of the lagging Southern regions [22,25,30].

Economic factors include, first, a low level of industrialisation. Employees in the manufacturing sector in Calabria historically account for an extremely low percentage of the total working population [22]. The competitiveness of the Calabrian productive system is low: Local firms are characterised by a low level of internationalisation and innovation, and Calabria accounts for an extremely small percentage—about 0.1% —of the total Italian exports [15].

However, its weak industrial development has, conversely, created a remarkable relevance of agriculture even today. Calabrian agriculture has shown for some years signs of dynamism in this sector [15], with a large and robust system of excellence [14]. This recent growth is based on the specialisation of some typical agricultural products, such as olive oil and citrus fruits (with the only cultivation of bergamot worldwide), and on this region’s prompt response to some emerging market trends such as those of organic, quality products, and nutraceuticals.

As far as the contextual factors are concerned, one of the crucial questions relates to transport accessibility. In fact, transport and logistics infrastructure and services are clearly fundamental not only to connect firms to global markets and supply chains, but also for other kinds of relationships (social, institutional, etc.) [31], and ultimately for regional development [32,33]. In particular, in the case of this peripheral location. EU data [34] makes evident the low level of transport accessibility in Calabria,

for all modes (rail, air and road). This lag is also true with respect to Information and Communication Technologies, where there is a ‘digital divide’ between Calabria, other Southern regions, and the Central-Northern regions [35].

The poor endowment of infrastructure and services highlighted above calls into question the role of the public sector, as concerns, in particular, services like education, justice, health, and social assistance [22], of which there is less availability for Southern citizens like the people of Calabria [36]. As can be seen, for example, from Figure 2, Calabria is the worst region in Italy in terms of financial resources spent for social services. This is something that clearly makes the bad social conditions of the population mentioned above (unemployment and poverty) even more dramatic and unbearable.

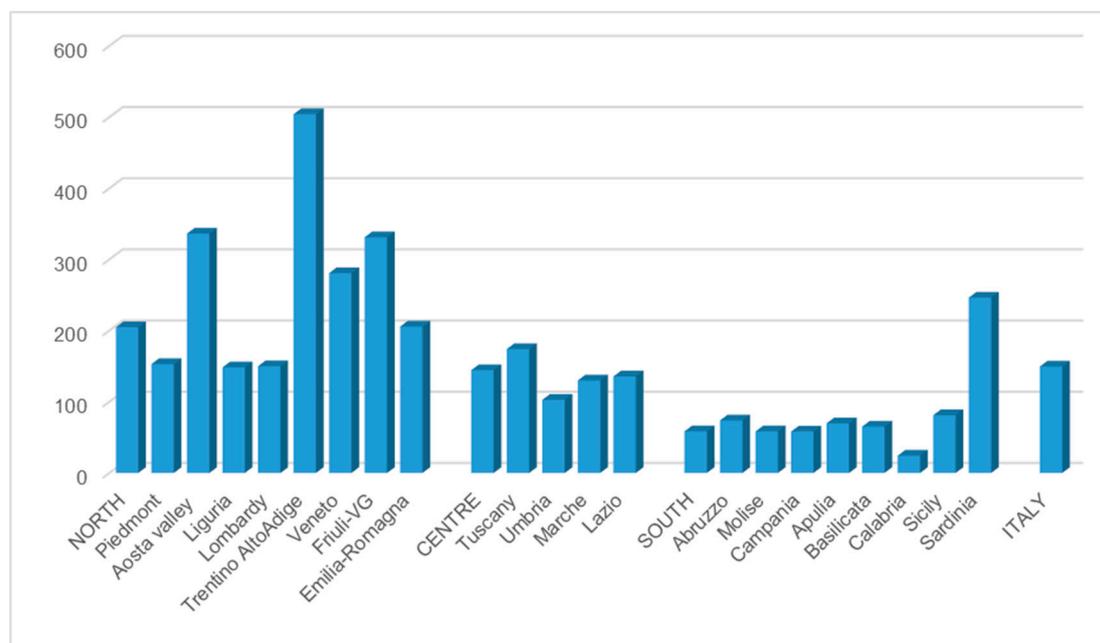


Figure 2. Italian regions (EU Nuts2) by expenditure per capita in social services in 2016 (euro). Source: our own elaboration on Istat data (Survey on interventions and social services provided by individual and associated municipalities).

Lastly, an additional contextual—institutional—factor that significantly affects the economy and society in Calabria, and in large areas of the Mezzogiorno, is the presence of the Mafia organisations (see, for example, [37,38]). The most important Mafia organisations in Italy are: Cosa nostra, in Sicily; ‘ndrangheta, in Calabria; and Camorra, in Campania (see also [39]).

As indicated by the map showing the presence of these organisations at the provincial scale (Figure 3), the Mafia constitutes a unique and specific problem for these Southern regions, which has several negative effects on the regular economic activities [40–42]. Its nefarious activities lead to direct and indirect costs for regular firms, such as extortion and constraints in recruiting workers; it discourages competition, as it uses its criminal power to protect their own ‘legal’ economic activities against potential competitors. These effects are true for any sector, in particular for agriculture, which, as said above, is still relevant in Calabria, and which has been suffering more than other sectors from the influence of the Mafia organizations ever since the Unification of Italy (1861). According to many historians and scholars, in fact, this organization was born and developed in rural areas [43–46].

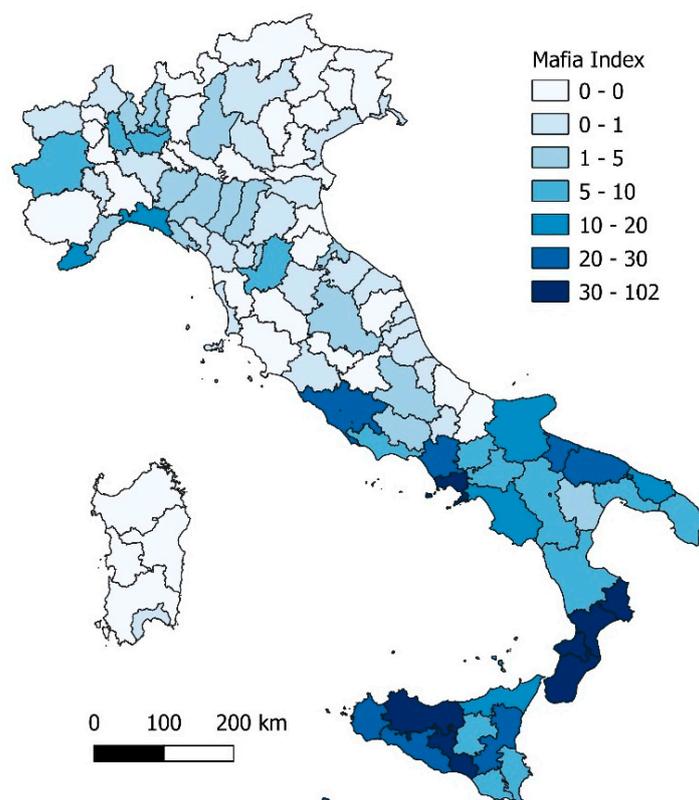


Figure 3. Mafia presence in Italy at the provincial scale (2000–2011); Source: Our own elaboration based on Fondazione Transcrime [47].

However, the presence of the Mafia also has specific cultural and social effects. For example, the presence of organised crime increases local communities' distrust of public institutions. Actually, this is the result of the lack of public institutions in a lawless environment, where the Mafia therefore provides private protection to landowners and businesses [48], gaining social consent and almost substituting the State itself [49].

Considering such extremely serious socio-economic and institutional conditions in Calabria, it is rather interesting to explore if and how social agriculture has developed there, and what effects and consequences it is causing for the local society and economy. The next section presents the outcomes of the field investigation which aimed to address all these questions.

4. Methodological Approach to the Field Investigation: Direct Interviews and Thematic Analysis

As explained in the Introduction, as far as our methodological approach is concerned, we followed a case study approach. In particular, we opted for an exploratory and instrumental type of case study.

Given the shortage of relevant data and literature concerning social farming in Southern Italy, and in particular in Calabria, we decided that the most suitable strategy to pursue our exploratory investigation was to conduct a set of semi-structured direct interviews with representatives of a set of Calabrian social farms.

In fact, there is still no systematic and reliable list, i.e., an official source about social farms in Calabria (and in Italy). The only source is the survey at the national level by CREA [20] mentioned in Section 2; but, as said there, it provides only a very rough picture of this phenomenon.

Therefore, in order to identify the Calabrian social farms which could be the subject of an interview, we used the snowball approach [50,51]. The Calabrian social farms are in fact a kind of "hidden population" [50] (p. 330), and therefore this was the only way to find and select them for our investigation.

As claimed by Goodman [52], the population of Calabrian social farms can, in other words, be defined as a “hard-to-reach population”, which is a “population for which sampling frames do not exist or are too difficult and/or too expensive to obtain” [52] (p. 350). In these cases, as underlined by Biernacki and Waldorf [53], the only way to identify a set of subjects to interview is to use the snowball sampling method. Our search for the Calabrian social farms was also supported by various other sources, like the websites of the social farms themselves, and press reviews about them [54] (They were used only in this stage; they were not used as data sources for our investigation on the characteristics of the social farms).

In total, we identified and selected nine social farms. The semi-structured direct interviews with their representatives were carried out between November 2017 and April 2018.

We personally conducted these interviews on the basis of an outline. The outline used, with open questions, was structured in three sections. The first concerns the social mission of the social farms; the second focuses on their characteristics and economic activities; the third focuses on some specific issues concerning only cooperatives. Interviews went ahead only after receiving informed consent.

These interviews were conducted in the Italian language. We analysed the transcripts of the interviews using thematic analysis [55–57]. Thematic analysis is one of the basic techniques in qualitative research, and is particularly suitable when researchers conduct applied research [58].

It is employed to treat qualitative data, especially the verbal expressions that come from open interviews. It aims at “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes and sub-themes) within data” [55] (p. 6). The identification of a relevant key theme depends on the judgement of the researcher, “in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question” [55] (p. 10). Therefore, it is not associated with any quantifiable measures. In our analysis, we identified recurrent themes and sub-themes (not necessarily linked to the outline of the interviews). We frequently used direct quotations in the text in order to provide clear evidence about the relevance and the prevalence of a theme, as is usually done in studies which use thematic analysis (see, for example, [59–62]).

In the analysis that follows, the data coming from the direct interviews are not the only data used. Other relevant data concerning the nine case studies under examination (for example, data from press reviews, from websites, data about economic performance from balance sheets) were used in order to integrate and complete the information provided by the qualitative investigation.

5. Results of the Investigation in Calabria

5.1. The Set of Social Farms: Basic Characteristics

The nine social farms which were the object of our field investigation are rather heterogeneous in terms of basic characteristics, such as legal form, location, size, and turnover (see Table 1).

They consist of six cooperatives (F, H, G, I, C, D), one association (E), and two consortia or groups of cooperatives, and/or firms and/or associations (A, B). They are located all over Calabria in the main Calabrian provinces (Reggio Calabria, Cosenza, Catanzaro), both in urban and rural (and mountain) areas. Two social farms are located in the province of Cosenza (F and H social cooperatives), two in the province of Catanzaro (B, and I social cooperative), and four in the province of Reggio Calabria (E, D, A, C).

They have different sizes, as they range from very small (less than ten employees) to big (more than 200 employees), and they have different ages, ranging from about 10 to 40 years. We have, therefore, different organization models. This is something that shows that social farms in Calabria are not only young and small initiatives, but some of them are big, organised, and presumably, as we will see later, rooted in the local social and economic fabric.

They produce a wide range of agricultural products, most of them linked with the local resources, the territorial specialisations and identities, like olives, citrus fruits (e.g., bergamot), silkworms, and vegetables. Moreover, they are engaged in manufacturing activities, like food processing (jams, olive oil, etc.) and handicrafts (ceramics). In addition, they offer a wide variety of services, like didactic

farms, education and training, pet-therapy and hippotherapy, and tourism. Most of these farms do not work in one sector/one activity, but, basically speaking, they follow a multifunctional, diversified, model.

Table 1. Basic characteristics of the Calabrian social farms interviewed.

Social Farm	Location (Province)	Legal Form	Foundation Year	Size *	Turnover (Euro)
A	Reggio C.	Group of cooperatives, firms, associations	2003	Big	More than 1mln
B	Catanzaro	Group of cooperatives and associations	1976	Big	500k–1mln
C	Reggio C.	Cooperative	2004	Medium	100k–500k
D	Reggio C.	Cooperative	2010	Small	100k–500k
E	Reggio C.	Association	2008	Small	100k–500k
F	Cosenza	Cooperative	1995	Small	Less than 100k
G	Catanzaro	Cooperative	2008	Small	Less than 100k
H	Cosenza	Cooperative	1982	Small	Less than 100k
I	Catanzaro	Cooperative	1995	Small	Less than 100k

Notes: * Small: Less than 50 employees; medium: 50–200 employees; big: More than 200.

5.2. The Economic Mission: Competitive and Growing Social Farms, Part of Innovative Networks

Most of the interviewees emphasised the good performance of their economic initiative. Analysing the information collected reveals the growth and expansion of most of these social farms, in terms of variables like turnover, employment, market area, etc.

G said that they had increased their activity and employment; F had increased its turnover in the last three years; social farms A and D were also on the increase in terms of turnover. In the case of A, for example, which is the biggest farm in our investigation, the turnover in the last year was 6.5 million euro, and had been increasing in the previous years, while they employ more than 200 hundred people. Most of these social farms say that they are expanding their market area, even at the national and international level (C, A).

One the key strategies employed in order to grow is diversification: Focusing on market segments (organic, quality products, ethics, etc.) which are on the increase at the macro-level (see, for example, [63], as concerns the global trends in the organic food market; [64] on the latest trends of the agricultural sector in Southern Italy), the farms diversify by proposing new and innovative products and services.

For example, in some cases, they cultivate new agricultural products, like pomegranates, which are greatly increasing in the agricultural markets (see, for example, [65]). They also specialise in new organic agri-food products. This is the case of C that produces new types of pesto, based on local products, like chili pepper and olives, controlled and certified; and of A, which, for example, is the only producer of organic *Cipolla di Tropea* in Italy.

A is also increasingly diversifying, by investing in nutraceuticals and cosmetic products (see, for example, [66]), and also in traditional hand weaving, for which they have created a new brand, which is being successfully promoted on the market. Textiles and clothes is a sector in which other interviewees are involved, like E, which is starting to produce a new kind of cashmere from goat hair. That last social farm has as its core activity hippo-therapy, which was a completely unknown service, ignored in Calabria, before then:

‘When we started, in this field there was nothing, there was much improvisation ... tabula rasa ...’

Interestingly, innovation for these respondents is not only of an informal and incremental nature. Some of them do, in fact, also invest in Research and Development, as in the case of A, which is creating a new R&D unit focused on nutraceuticals, cosmetics, and curative products based on the typical agricultural products of Calabria (citric, olive oil).

Moreover, they are doing research and innovation in cooperation with other entrepreneurial and institutional actors, meaning that they are able to network. D, for example, participates in projects

in cooperation with universities concerning agricultural development (focused, for example, on the cultivation of the prickly pear). E also works on a project involving hippo-therapy (focused on the ability of horses to perceive and recognise disability, by studying the stress level of horses—in terms of their heart rates—when they are close to disabled people).

Interviewees also pay special attention to the strategies of distribution and commercialisation, which are actually rather varied and modern. E-commerce, ethical purchasing groups, direct selling, specialised shops, large multiple retailers, etc.: Those are the many channels of distribution that characterise the market strategies of these social farms. Again, this is interesting in the case of the biggest social farms interviewed.

A promotes and develops important brands in the fashion sector; and also in the organic food sector. And even more interesting is the case of C that has several modern channels of distribution. They range from large multiple retailers to shops specialising in ethical products, which are produced by cooperatives associated with Libera (working in property confiscated from the Mafia), to school canteens which use organic products grown by C in their meals, and to private restaurants which either use their products in their dishes or sell them directly to their customers. That means a high familiarity with, and ability to operate in, the agri-food final markets, at the national and international scale.

5.3. The Social Mission: Activities and Services for the Local Community

If, on the one hand, most of the Calabrian social farms are able to be competitive and to expand their business, on the other hand, they are also able to accomplish their social mission, which is actually the fundamental goal of their existence. Considering the four types of social activities and services that social farms can provide in order to be classified as such according to Italian law (Law 141/2015), as indicated in the Introduction, the results of the interviews show that these farms are able to offer and effectively cover this range of activities and services.

Interestingly, not all these farms use public funds (for example, EU funds) in order to provide social services, but they use either revenues from production activities (sales) or donations. For example, F, a small social farm, said that they do not use public funds, but 70% of its revenues come from sales, and 30% from donations. Although we could not collect sufficient and complete data concerning this issue, in many cases the interviewees told us that their ‘dependence’ on public funds is declining, thanks to the upward trend of their market sales.

First, starting with the inclusion and employment of disadvantaged and vulnerable people, the results of the direct investigations show that the nine Calabrian social farms host different types of disadvantaged people: Disabled people, drug addicts, the long-term unemployed, children in problem families, immigrants, etc. For example, H employs (for about four months in the year) disabled people for the seasonal work related to the production of silkworms. The social mission of F involves employing disabled people in agricultural activities, to whom they also offer several services. In agriculture, they also employ nine immigrant as farmhands, who are housed in a building owned by the cooperative. I does organic farming, employing disabled people, children in problem families, drug addicts, the long-term unemployed, (former) prisoners, and immigrants.

Interestingly, for some of the interviewees, inclusion through social farming of some kinds of disadvantaged people has turned out to be so effective that some cooperatives then decided to employ other segments of vulnerable people. The experience of B, in this respect, is extremely illuminating:

‘The aim of our cooperative is the integration into its work of disadvantaged people like abused women, etc. ... But over time B has realised that this type of activity lent itself well, became applicable, alternatively, to other groups of disadvantaged people, such as drug addicts, immigrants, etc. ... therefore, an involvement of other groups in social farming activities is underway.’

B had recently started the only centre for autism at the regional scale, in which they are going to introduce social farming as well, and this definitely represents an innovation in social assistance in Calabria. Moreover, they have another social farming project which aims to integrate four people with

psychiatric problems, with low surveillance (one operator goes in the morning, checks how the day is organised, and then another goes in the evening), who then follow an autonomous path of inclusion. These people are entrusted with agricultural production activities, in the strict sense.

Secondly, as far as the medical, psychological, rehabilitative therapies, using animals and plants, are concerned, again the ability to accomplish the social mission clearly comes out from the interviews. In this respect, the experience of E is extremely interesting.

They offer advanced services using animals, like pet-therapy and hippo-therapy. In particular, E offers pet-therapy and hippo-therapy for disadvantaged people (disabled people, children etc.). So, for example, they host on average from three to five disabled children and, in some cases, in cooperation with other associations, they can even host as many as 40 disabled children. In 2016, E registered about 4/5 thousands persons as users of its services. Schools are important targets involved in the services provided by E:

‘We do projects, for example, with schools and kindergarten. The school contacts us, to do pet therapy, hippo-therapy, and we prepare a program There is, for example, the case of a school in Gioiosa Jonica, which every 15 days brings 70 disabled children for pet-therapy and hippo-therapy ... ’

Thirdly, concerning the projects focusing on biodiversity protection, environmental and food education (and on the promotion of the knowledge of the territory), the findings of our investigation show that, in several cases, Calabrian social farms are engaged in these kinds of projects. This is the case, for example, of C, which offers courses on issues like eco-sustainability, ethical and socially responsible consumption to primary and secondary school students. In this respect, it cooperates with public and private institutions, like the State Forestry Authority. But, even other interviewees, like B, are paying increasing attention to these issues that are the basis of new common projects:

‘Social farming, in its most multifunctional meaning, lends itself well to combining welfare and environmental sustainability ... think, for example, of the discourse on the impoverished public domain, full of abandoned land ... there are many issues that we are trying to link up, also together with A ... ’

Lastly, the fourth sphere of the social mission concerns social activities and services for the local community. In this case, it is worthwhile taking into consideration the experience of F, which, for example, offers services to the local community, like a night shelter, participation in the local markets and small local fairs, door-to-door sales, based also on the strong commitment of the volunteers that come from the local community itself. There is a mutual relationship: On the one hand, the local community represents a strategic partner of the cooperative; and, on the other hand, the latter interprets the needs that the community expresses.

This ability to get in contact and cooperate with the local community allowed the initial distrust of the new services related to social farming to be overcome, as witnessed by E:

‘The schools located in this area have all come to us ... Initially, we were going around to present our services, to explain what is a social farm ... now they look for us ...’ ‘At the beginning, the main problem to face was the complete lack of knowledge of these structures, the social farms, their pedagogical work, etc. At that time schools were very rigid, they did not easily modify their programmes in order to accept our proposals ... now they seem to be more open to services like ours ... many schools work independently ... some schools have to follow an internal program, and in others the teachers have the possibility to choose ... compared with the past, there is now more direct contact with teachers ... there has been an awareness, that is, a cultural evolution in the local schools ... ’

5.4. Threats and Opportunities for Accomplishing the Mission of Calabrian Social Farms: Three Critical Issues

The interviews made it possible to cast light on the economic and social mission of Calabrian social farms. As said in the Introduction, this was indeed the basic objective of the field investigation. However, as usual in any type of “open” qualitative action like this, new, unexpected important issues

arose from the interviewees, although they were not the initial focus of the investigation. This is the case in the following three critical questions, which, according to the interviewees, are fundamental and decisive, for the future development of their activity.

5.4.1. Much Too Peripheral: The Geographical, Economic, and Institutional Isolation

The first key issue which pervades, and emerges from, the words of the interviewees, is the question of the isolation. This constitutes a permanent locational disadvantage, which affects the activity of these farms in several ways. Indeed, being located in a peripheral area concerns not only geography and accessibility, but also relationships, networks, institutional support, etc.

Social farms complain first about the high costs of transport and logistics services, compared with their “competitors” located in other Italian regions, due apparently to the farms’ highly peripheral location, and to the shortage of efficient and modern transport infrastructures and services, as seen in Section 3. The question concerning the accessibility is clearly emphasised by the interviewees. B, for example, points out the lack of public transport services in its location. Although it is located close to the access to the motorway, and close to the shopping centre, all employees and all the users of its services cannot use any public transport services.

However, social farms complain not only about their distance from national and global markets (low market accessibility), but also about the distance between themselves, which makes it difficult to establish internal relationships and networks. This means that there is lack of spatial and relational proximity, which can otherwise be a source of external economies (specialisation and agglomeration economies, knowledge spillovers, etc.) advantageous for them (see, for example, [67,68]). In other words, social farms underline that they are isolated even within Calabria, as there is lack of clusters of firms as in the industrial districts (which created a successful model of spatial organisation of industrial development in other Italian regions: see [69]). This makes the manufacturing landscape extremely fragmented. One might even say desertified [15], in the same way as emerged from recent research focused on agri-food firms [14]. As witnessed by H:

‘We work in a sort of desert, because there are no synergies, no network, and no integration ... ’

Furthermore, according to the interviewees, isolation also concerns the lack of support by the local institutions. They highlight that they are not adequately supported: They feel as if they are “left alone”, “leaderless”, by the local institutions. They complain about the lack of development strategies for the local agri-food sector and for social farming, and the lack of support policies for firms and networks. As said by A, referring to the representatives of the local institutions:

‘They never listened to us during the planning phase of the measures and the actions ... ’

F is particularly concerned about the effectiveness of the role of the regional government:

‘... the role of the regional government is not adequate, and regional funding, on the basis of the legislation in force, is not timely. Moreover, even the definition of the policy guidelines for social farming and social services is not adequate. If the support was adjusted to the actual needs of the cooperatives, our social services could be quintupled ... ’

According to C’s evidence, this lack of institutional support and leadership means that some important strategies for local economic development are not implemented, while they talk about the potential and the governance of the local agricultural district in the Gioia Tauro Plain area:

‘... that of the Piana di Gioia Tauro, a context with a great specialisation in olive and citrus cultivation (in particular the clementines are a product of excellence) ... However, this district has not been able to create, over time and durably, synergies, networks and organisations capable of effectively engaging in the promotion and enhancement of the typical agro-food products and the landscape of olive and citrus fruits. Therefore, the competitive level of the local district/supply chain is low, despite its potential ... ’

However, what is also interesting to highlight and observe is that many of these interviewees are able to overcome these difficulties, such as isolation and lack of support by institutions, and are trying to cooperate and build their own networks, which are extremely valuable for their social mission. This is the case, for example, for both the large groups of cooperatives and agricultural firms organised by A, or of the large number of associations and cooperatives organised by B. However, the several linkages of many of these social farms with national institutions and networks also highlight their willingness to overcome the constraints due to their marginal location. For example, some of these social farms are linked to Libera, which is a network of associations, social cooperatives, movements and groups, schools, unions, dioceses and parishes, scout groups, founded in 1995 by Don Luigi Ciotti, and is present throughout Italy with several regional and local branches, and popular for its position against the Mafia organisations, and against other corruption and crime phenomena (source: www.libera.it). Moreover, the increasing cooperation between many of the social farms is itself a sign that they are able to fight against the disadvantages posed by the geography and by the low 'institutional quality' of Calabria, as said by B.

5.4.2. What Kind of People Are Needed for Growing and Expanding: Professional Workers or Volunteers?

Besides the question of isolation, a second relevant issue emerging from the interviews is the shift from non-professional workers to professional workers (according to the Italian Law 381/1991, social cooperatives can have voluntary members), because of the need for adequate technical and managerial profiles as the cooperatives expand their business. In other words, the motivations, skills, and competences of these human resources together constitute a decisive turning point for their growth.

Producing and selling products on the market, trying to pursue a competitive strategy based on several factors and on specific standards, as seen above, entails that social farms upgrade and raise the skills and the qualifications of their human resources. In fact, although some of these social farms have adequate know-how, in this respect, others are going through a transition phase. In the case of E, for example, the interviewee says that the qualification of their staff is adequate:

'The two people in charge of our association and of its activities (the President, and her husband) are respectively an engineer and a veterinarian, while the collaborating volunteers are all women, graduates (an accountant, a graduate in forestry sciences, a pedagogist, etc.), coming from the province of Reggio ...'

Instead, in the case of B, one of the biggest social farms where we interviewed, the lack of professional, entrepreneurial, and managerial know-how is one of the most critical questions that they are facing. This shortage greatly undermines the firms' organization, and the daily processes and activities with which in the past they had experienced various problems:

'... .. And we had this problem, for example, when we had to close the balance sheets, always at a loss! There was an evident difficulty in terms of the financial sustainability of our activity, so we had difficulty with the payments of many workers.... So many delays in payments ... So, we said: The cooperative must help disadvantaged people, must give them dignity, but it must also stand on its own feet! We have to recruit an adequate number of managerial staff to improve ...'

For them, this was a kind of dilemma, especially considering the context, Calabria, where they are located:

'One of our dilemmas is: How to grow up, without losing the ethical dimension, towards legality?'

Interestingly, B also tried to overcome this problem by cooperating with other cooperatives (A) engaged in social farming, but which have more experience and competences in entrepreneurship and management. Then, through the exchange of knowledge and experience, they can cope with this issue.

However, other social farms are concerned about the possible negative effects resulting from this professional evolution of their staff, which essentially means losing their authentic nature, the original

sense of their mission. In fact, one of the main concerns of F, for example, that is currently expanding its activities, is:

‘ to avoid an excess of professionalisation, and therefore to prevent the risk of the separation of the cooperative from the context in which it performs its social function . . . ’

Anyway, the point is that, given its vocation/specialisation in agriculture, as explained in Section 3, Calabria does not, in fact, have such a poor education and training system in this sector. In Calabria, there are, in fact, sixteen Agricultural Technical Institutes for upper secondary specialised education, which is a high number compared with other Italian regions (source: www.agro-polis.it). Moreover, a recent investigation of the Calabrian agri-food entrepreneurs showed their satisfaction with higher secondary education in agriculture in Calabria [14].

Therefore, as underlined by some of the interviewees, although the search for some profiles is difficult, in the end it would be not impossible to find adequate technical profiles (for example, agronomists).

5.4.3. The Most Critical and Serious Question: The Presence of the Mafia

Some of these social farms have been frequently threatened and attacked by the Mafia organisations located in these areas. For example, several attacks were suffered by B, C, D, and A. They suffered thefts of machinery and equipment, fires, cut-down trees, death threats, and gunshots, so much that some of them were even put in the spotlight of the main national press, drawing the attention of the public (See, for example: https://www.corriere.it/buone-notizie/18_settembre_26/arma-vincente-la-ndrangheta-si-chiama-A-fattura-7-milioni-860573e2-c177-11e8-bcc0-6fbb0e9f9aa8.shtml; <https://video.repubblica.it/mondo-solidale/calabria-noi-imprenditori-agricoli-tra-attentati-e-minacce-loro-ci-attaccano-e-noi-festeggiamo/347598/3481841>; https://www.repubblica.it/solidarieta/volontariato/2020/02/27/news/calabria_furti_alle_coop_solidali_che_danno_fastidio_alle_cosche-249706798/).

As said by B:

‘ Now, with the expansion of our activity, we risk meeting new ‘problems’ ... the last incident happened in October, they broke through the roof, and they stole some machines and some tools. As far as other episodes are concerned (fire, devastation of the land), from the investigations, it is clear that they were caused by the Mafia organisations . . . ’

And, as also told by D, concerning the attacks that they suffered:

‘ Mobsters went to our employees who were working on our land that was confiscated [from the Mafia], and which was granted to us, and they told them that, if they did not leave the land by the end of the day, they would kill them . . . ’

As the interviewees explained, the reasons for these attacks are several. Firstly, most of these respondents (D, C, B) work on confiscated land. This land, thanks to the Italian Law (Decree-law February 4, 2010, n. 4) which created the National Agency in charge of the administration of assets seized and confiscated from organised crime (<https://www.benisequestraticonfiscati.it/>), has been confiscated from the mobsters and then re-assigned to subjects (for example, the social cooperatives) who will use it with social objectives [70]. This is a point that is clearly not easily accepted by the previous ‘owners’ of those properties. Secondly, a key reason for this aggression is the growth and expansion of their activity, not only in strictly economic terms, but also in social terms, as they employ an increasing number of people at the local scale, and their work is gaining a good reputation and a greater acceptance by the local community. Obviously, this is not appreciated by the local Mafia organisations that are used to playing a key dominant, if not exclusive, role in the local economy and society [71], based not only on their military power, but also on social consent [72], and on a cohesive localised network of relationships, which make up their social capital [73]. As said by B:

‘This is also why we are in the sights of the ‘ndrangheta ... because we grew up ... everything started with the confiscated property, the building where the local Mafia clan lived. We are an organisation that gives more and more work, and this bothers them ... ‘

Moreover, a fact even less appreciated by the Mafia organisations is that these social farms do not passively ‘accept’ their pressure and their threats, but instead they react, they refuse their intimidation, reporting any event to the local judicial authority. In the past, as some of the interviewees witnessed, they were usually isolated when they first reacted to the Mafia organisations and therefore they were perceived as, and they actually were, weak. However, some of them courageously resisted even if they were alone, thanks in particular to the role played by some individuals, as in the case of B and of A.

Even if it took a great deal of time, the resistance of these people, together with the increasing successes of the central government against the Mafia organisations, brought positive effects (see, for example, [74,75]). As said by A, a kind of virtuous cumulative mechanism in terms of consensus rampaged: The more there are organisations (firms, cooperatives, associations, etc.) which are not scared and able to resist to the Mafia, the more other subjects (firms, cooperatives, associations, etc.) feel less isolated and find the courage to react, and so on.

‘the founders of A were, alone, at the forefront in the resistance to the Mafia, but today even those who initially were scared are getting closer and closer to us ... ‘

Furthermore, the ability to be competitive on the market in terms of factors such as product quality, and the premium paid precisely because they oppose the Mafia organisations (see, for example, the studies by Marotta and Nazzaro [76–78]), further “convince” other farmers to resist:

‘Before our initiative, most of the farms could not survive the attacks and the pressure of the Mafia, but nowadays we pay 40 cents per kilo for their oranges, and this definitely helps them to resist and survive ... ‘

‘Ethics is not only right, but also profitable ... ‘

In this respect, fighting against the Mafia, and therefore influencing and changing the Calabrian society, economy, and culture, has itself become the ultimate social mission of some of these social farms. This is the case for example of A and C, as one of them said:

‘This is a basic aspect of our identity, of our mission in this place: Getting in contact, connecting, with cooperatives and firms attached by the ‘ndrangheta, and supporting them in their reaction and resistance to its pressure ... ‘

6. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Our impression, at the end of this exploratory investigation on Calabrian social farms, is that practicing social farming successfully in Calabria is hard, but not impossible. In most of the cases, that we have had the possibility to investigate and analyse, the findings are rather positive, both as concerns the social mission and economic performance. Therefore, our response to our basic research question is that social farming has the potential to make a significant contribution to a new path of development in Calabria, not only in social and economic terms, but also in cultural terms.

Clearly, we cannot state that is the case based on a quantitative evaluation. We are aware that we investigated just nine farms, and their economic weight is rather low in the context of the regional economy. However, our approach, and our conclusion, is based on the qualitative findings, which turn out to be extremely significant, in the light of the research question.

Most of these farms are able to be competitive on the market, so it means that they are able to exploit at its best one of the main natural vocations of Calabria, agriculture. They are, therefore, contributing to the growth of one the most important sectors, agri-food, which is on the increase in the regional economy. They are able to offer valuable and varied social services, one of the most critical

issue as concerns the provision of public services in Calabria, so filling an important gap in terms of social assistance in this region. Crucially, they have been able to reject and to react against the Mafia organisations, becoming a point of reference, almost a symbol, for all farmers who are not willing to accept passively their influence, and for whoever feels the same. In so doing, they are contributing to combat and weaken one of the most critical negative factors in the Calabrian economy, society, and culture; starting with the rural areas which, as underlined above, are places where historically the Mafia organisations are strongly rooted and predominant.

The nine cases that we investigated are seemingly able to produce all the five types of virtuous effects/benefits that we identified and mentioned above, based on the (scant) literature of social farming in disadvantaged areas. First, they provide services, re-establishing the link between food and community, responding in an innovative way to its needs [18], as we have seen particularly in the cases of F and E. Secondly, they are part of networks, both formal, for example with universities and schools, public institutions, and informal, with other social farms, exchanging ideas, knowledge and experience, and with associations, local consumers, citizens, and so on [2]. Even though our impression is that they are not as able to establish a number and a range of linkages as, on average, Southern social farms do (see Section 2). Probably, the high degree of isolation associated with their location in Calabria plays a certain role. Thirdly, in some cases, they have been able to create brands, with their own distinctive features [10], as is the case of A in the fashion sector and in the organic food sector, and C, as concerns ethical products. Fourthly, as far as environment and landscape maintenance are concerned, we found that most of these farms specialise in organic farming; and, moreover, in some cases, like C, they also provide education and training in the fields of environment, landscape, and sustainability. Lastly, we have found that most of them are able to offer job opportunities not only to disadvantaged groups, but also to professionals.

More interestingly, they have achieved these results despite all the geographical, institutional, organizational, cultural, and historical constraints seen above. We could even say that, where others have failed (see, for example, the failing strategy of bottom-up development followed for decades by the central and local governments, as underlined by Padovani and Provenzano [79], and Servidio [80]), and where others are not strong enough to fight against some “factors” (see the complaint by local entrepreneurs about the difficulty of resisting the pressure of the Mafia), social farming, in its small way (but, nevertheless, very significant, symbolic and ‘educational’), is successful.

Nevertheless, most of these social farms still need to make progress and to improve in several aspects. Therefore, some policy implications of our investigation are clear, as, despite their ability, Calabrian social farms cannot be left completely alone in this social and economic ‘mission’.

It is fundamental, first, to support social farms in the training and recruitment of technical and managerial staff, helping them to improve their skills and qualifications level. Second, it is no less important to subsidise them when they make new investments, in order to increase their technological level and to improve their processes. This is an issue that the data from the CREA survey also highlighted. In this respect, digitalisation is a key issue for their growth. Third, another direct support concerns helping them to improve the sales and distribution stage, which is fundamental in order to expand their market area, in particular at the international level.

As far as other factors are concerned, the priority is to improve the context in which these social farms operate, in terms of location factors like transport accessibility and the quality of local public institutions (bureaucracy). It is fundamental to reduce the disadvantages suffered by these farms due to isolation. Furthermore, it cannot be emphasized enough that it is necessary to fight against the Mafia organisations, thereby neutralising their ability to adversely affect entrepreneurial activities like those related to social farming. Clearly, the farmers cannot win this ‘war’ alone.

Lastly, as far as the isolation is concerned, and in order to foster networking, social farms, in the same way as other firms in Calabria, should join forces with a better support from public institutions. This means, for example, supporting initiatives for integrated rural and local development, based on

bottom-up approaches and collaboration between the private and public sector (as concerns Calabria, see, for example, [81,82]).

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