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# How social profiles influence community entrepreneurs' capacity to develop networks. A Bourdieuan perspective on Italian community co-operatives

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**Abstract** During the last decade, Italian community co-operatives have emerged as a new form of community-development organization. The literature on community-based enterprises (CBEs) explains this phenomenon as a community that becomes entrepreneurial and develops locally based businesses for its socio-economic development. Nevertheless, a more critical view of CBEs reveals the partiality of a community's participation in these organizations. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the extent to which the mainstream theoretical framework for analysing these organizations has influenced the general understanding of this phenomenon. This research brings into discussion social–capital theories, particularly Putnam's neo-communitarian approach. It also proposes a diverse perspective on CBEs and community development by offering a critical analysis based on Pierre Bourdieu's works. The present study considers a specific form of CBEs—the community co-operative—with particular reference to the Italian context. Results from an online questionnaire (twenty-nine participants) and a cross-case study analysis (five co-operatives) show that community entrepreneurs have common determined social profiles and these help them to aggregate certain local agents instead of others.

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## Introduction

Community-based enterprises (CBEs) are collective-owned businesses with a commitment towards their communities. They are owned and managed by community members and carry out various business activities with the aim of benefitting their communities (Zeuli and Radel, 2005; Lang and Roessl, 2011; Somerville and McElwee, 2011; Walzer, 2021). These collective firms are part of the wider field of community development, a process that aims to foster social cohesion and economic wealth through the participation of communities (Henderson and Vercseg, 2010).

Sociological studies tend to view local communities as unique bodies that participate as an entity in creating and managing local CBEs (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Wilkinson and Quarter, 1996; Peredo and James Chrisman, 2006; Mori and Sforzi, 2018). In contrast, commenting on Peredo and James Chrisman (2006), Somerville and McElwee (2011) pointed out how difficult it is to accept the idea that '*CBE is therefore the result of a process in which the community acts entrepreneurially [ . . . ] to create and operate a new enterprise*' (p. 4) and asked how an entire community could collectively behave in this way.

The hypothesis is that by changing the theoretical perspective on the research object, it is possible to underline diverse dynamics. Essentially, if these organizations are funded and managed by residents' limited shares, how does this influence their social aggregation capacity? First of all, who are these community entrepreneurs?

Consequently, this study examines CBEs and the predominant approach to describing them. It reviews the most prominent theoretical framework for analysing CBEs and community development—the social capital. This is a mixed-methods research (Creswell, 2009) that uses dual tools, an online questionnaire submitted to twenty-nine community entrepreneurs, and a cross-case study of five organizations. It focuses on a particular form of CBEs; that is, the community co-operative. The reason for this choice is the major rooting that this form has within the community, offering a solution to involve numerous subjects into a democratically managed business (Fulton and Ketilson, 1992; Wilkinson and Quarter, 1996). The Italian community co-operative movement is raising awareness of its capacity to spread particularly fast and to adapt to various contexts (Mori and Sforzi, 2018; Bianchi, 2021).

## Community development, a narrow form of general well-being

Generally, community development strengthens inherent forces inside a community (through self-help and mutual support) to raise awareness about

the capabilities of citizens to face common problems and leverage their own resources (Wilkinson and Quarter, 1996; Henderson and Vercseg, 2010; Craig *et al.*, 2011; Phillips and Pittman, 2015). As Kleinhans *et al.* (2019) pointed out, CBEs take advantage of these relations for developing their businesses because they need to acquire assets and resources for starting up their organizations. Moreover, these networks help enhance understanding of the issues and opportunities in local communities.

In the wider category of CBEs, Italian community co-operatives can find their place because they create a permanent entrepreneurial system for the benefit of the community. Community co-operatives are set up primarily by local residents to fulfil their community's interest. At the base of these organizations, there is a collective process for a state-of-need recognition (Zeuli and Radel, 2005; Lang and Roessl, 2011; Mori and Sforzi, 2018). In the last decade, in Italy, the community co-operative phenomenon has emerged as the main trend in local socio-economic development embodying the main characteristics of community development. Local social awareness arises from collective processes for recognizing local public resources and promoting their sustainable management: this shapes new patterns for the social usage of local assets (Tricarico, 2014). Generally, the relationships of community co-operatives with communities and the role of citizens in promoting the general interest become central in their functioning (Mori and Sforzi, 2018).

The literature highlights the key relevance of networks for the creation of CBEs and how these connections can influence the success of these local initiatives. Nevertheless, taking a more critical view on previous research efforts, a partiality in the analysis of these networks and organizations appears. Apparently, networks replicate the same dynamics everywhere and have a standard process of operation in every context. The community participates in the enterprise; the community supports the enterprise; and the community acts as an entrepreneur. The critical issue to emerge is the unreasonable possibility that the community, as a unique entity, participates in its wholeness in the community process and then in the CBE. Indeed, researchers propose a description of the community–enterprise phenomenon that could appear generalist. Exemplarily, Peredo and James Chrisman (2006) claimed that community enterprises '*are owned, managed, and governed by the people, rather than by government or some smaller group of individuals on behalf of the people*' (p. 316). Along with these examples, Zeuli and Radel (2005) presented an overrepresentation of these dynamics because they hold that '*co-operatives are often developed in response to a small town or urban neighborhood's desire for self-sufficient*' status (p. 50). In this sense, researchers assume that a co-operative can learn about and address the needs and desires of an entire community. The same general deduction is

also present in Bandini *et al.* (2014) that '*community becomes an entrepreneur to meet collective needs*' (p. 9). These representations mostly assume, rather than explain, the connections between the entrepreneurial organizations and communities. They recognize the presence of networks and collaboration, but they generalize these phenomena and depict a reality where every community seems to be totally involved in the project. Even if authors acknowledge the local residents' low participation (Wilkinson and Quarter, 1996; Somerville and McElwee, 2011; Mori, 2017), the extent of these groups and how they generate an adequate representation of the community's issues and possible solutions remain unclear. Moreover, it is undefined who these entrepreneurs are. This aspect might have a direct effect on the creation of those networks and connections that enable the work of CBEs.

Kleinhans *et al.* (2019) indicated that only certain community members take part in the creation of CBEs. The authors also noticed how people who start up CBEs have previous experience in other forms of community development. Moreover, Somerville and McElwee (2011) claimed that it is a mistake to emphasize the participation of the whole community in these enterprises. The participation of community members appears to be inconsistent and insufficient. Nembhard (2004) observed that not all community members participate in the CBEs or even used to be clients of these businesses.

Looking at the bigger picture, the analysis must consider diversity and social divisions within a territory. Barnes (2005) emphasizes that the community development process can be strengthened by cultural and ethnic communalities between certain residents within a community, but this does not mean that the whole community is involved in the projects. People living in the same geographical area can have diverse social, cultural, religious, and political backgrounds; therefore, it might be difficult for them to feel like a whole community; instead, they will identify with a specific social group (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Barnes, 2005; Phillips and Pittman, 2015). Furthermore, a study by Zeuli *et al.* (2004) underlines how some authors (Fulton and Ketilson, 1992; Wilkinson and Quarter, 1996; Bhuyan and Leistritz, 2000) have inquired about the behaviour of the community co-operatives, assuming that the organization is an autonomous entity, rather than examining the relations between them and local communities. Lang and Roessl (2011) highlight that to examine the governance of the community co-operatives, it is necessary to relate analysis of the organizations to the social and cultural contexts where they operate. Similarly, Swaroop and Morenoff (2006) investigate how the socio-economic setting influences residents' reasons and approaches to community development, pointing out different patterns between contexts, even within the one narrow geographical area.

Consequently, it is plausible that a group of entrepreneurs leads the enterprise for the general interest. Therefore, these organizations arise from a particular group of people in the community and reach certain shares of local communities based on networks developed by members of co-operatives. For these reasons, the analysis must recalibrate the view on community co-operatives and approach the examination in a diverse way. If it is plausible that less than the entire community is involved in the enterprise, then it is necessary to comprehend who comprises the active part of the community in co-operatives and to what extend their social profiles influence the generation of networks for the functioning of CBEs. It is possible to hypothesize that the founders of community co-operatives generate projects for their communities by interpreting the local social realities and aggregating people from their social networks. However, this does not mean that the founders engage all local residents. Because of these considerations, this research addresses the following questions: (i) do community entrepreneurs have specific common social characteristics? Consequently, (ii) do these social characteristics influence the formation of networks and collaborations useful for the community development work of CBEs?

The next section introduces social–capital theories that can support the examination of the relations formation and networks functioning. Community development and CBE literature stress the relevance of social connections as a key element. Therefore, social capital appears as the most reasonable framework. Besides, the critical analysis also engages these theories, demonstrating how this theoretical perspective has deeply influenced the shape of community development and CBEs in their current conceptualization.

## Reviewing Putnam

Putnam's work is recognized as the most diffused framework for interpreting the role of civic society, with particular attention paid to community development objectives (DeFilippis, 2001; Siisiäinen, 2003; Kay, 2006; Bertotti *et al.*, 2012). Putnam saw social capital as a resource that strengthens social cohesion and improves life quality. He emphasized how values and moral norms play a key role in governing networks, allowing collaboration, and facilitating reciprocity. The main weakness in Putnam's analysis concerns the origin of social trust. Siisiäinen (2003) observed that reciprocity cannot only be considered as an implicit consequence of civil society membership. Putnam did not consider the social divisions inherent in societies or how people from different social classes have diverse patterns in approaching socialization and civic engagement (Swaroop and Morenoff, 2006). Moreover, in his analysis, social conflicts are not considered. Thus,

the fact that people might aggregate themselves to advance their claims against other social groups is not acknowledged. Underpinned by opposite ideological views, these divisions and conflicts galvanize people and resources around various aims and objectives and generate diverse social actions (DeFilippis, 2001; Siisiäinen, 2003).

Hence, it is possible to see how Bourdieu (1977, 1979, 1986) provided a valuable explanation regarding how subjects respond to their social-status obligations, cultural background, and family teachings. Putnam did not consider social classes and groups but social aggregation (DeFilippis, 2001). Therefore, the analysis must consider how the social–capital dynamics that Putnam (2000) described can refer only to specific social groups sharing these norms and values. This is because they are inherent in their cultural backgrounds and are shared among members, pertaining mostly to advantaged economic conditions and higher levels of education (Swaroop and Morenoff, 2006).

Therefore, a critical analysis must move on from Putnam's mainstream functionalist interpretation to the Bourdieu structuralist approach. Bourdieu (1986) analysed the creation and functioning of social relations inside the social structures that embody subjects and symbolical meanings. This symbolism gives significance to people's social realities (Bourdieu, 1979). Another of Bourdieu's major contributions is the connection between social, cultural, and economic capital. This triage interconnects dynamics and resources according to the subjects' aims. Therefore, people produce social actions according to their personal will and objectives, but they will always reproduce the social dynamics that they embody during their existence in relation to their social status (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu (1986) states that social capital is a network of connections (among subjects) that are not naturally given but are created and maintained by members. Further, Bourdieu (*ibidem*) showed how social capital tends to bring together individuals as homogeneous as possible from similar social groups. These have mechanisms of representations and use symbols and meaning to foster their existence, reproduce their power, and strengthen their own vision of reality.

Bourdieu (1977, 1979) explained how certain people with specific social characteristics and common cultural capital act in a solidary and altruistic way to prove their vision of the world to others. They gather resources through social capital because they share objectives and mutual trust, but it is most important that they aim to prove the value of their ideas regarding the interpretation of social reality. Therefore, even if these explanations are morally comprehensible and shareable, as is working together for community development, it is not logically consequential that all the subjects in that society share this vision because there are pre-existing divisions due to social differences that distance people.

Considering the social complexity of communities, it is necessary to individuate those dynamics that generate the community co-operatives, their aims, objectives, services, and relations to territories. According to Lang and Roessl (2011), Majee and Hoyt (2011), and Somerville and McElwee (2011), community co-operatives represent a share of the local population; the entire community does not participate in these enterprises. In fact, these groups draw on their social connections for achieving their social and economic goals.

In conclusion, Bourdieu's theories present a more adequate perspective to answer the research questions. His theory supports a proper analysis of the community development because it contextualizes these processes in social realities where, despite aiming for general interest, social groups struggle for the approval of their actions, galvanize capital to achieve their objectives, and justify their actions through the assumption of a symbolic power, such as community interest and civic commitment, for the common good.

## Research methodology

The reason for selecting Italy as the main context of this research was interest in investigating the specific form of community co-operative, developing more connections with territories rather than with other forms of CBEs (Vieta, 2010; Lang and Roessl, 2011; Majee and Hoyt, 2011), which forms the essential core of this research. Moreover, the Italian co-operative movement has a long history and tradition that have mutually influenced the rest of European co-operative movements (Bianchi, 2019). Therefore, considering the rapid growth of the community co-operative movement and how similar characteristics are traceable in other countries (Lang and Roessl, 2011; Majee and Hoyt, 2011; Mori and Sforzi, 2018), this was deemed an interesting case study capable of revealing a great deal about the trends on a more macro- and transnational level.

For this research, the approach was a mixed-method study (Creswell, 2009), collecting data from various sources that engaged a consistent number of participants. Two different research tools were necessary to identify, first, a general trend of a relatively new phenomenon and, second, to deepen the examination of social dynamics, analysed within their contexts (Yin, 2009). Consequently, the first step consisted of results from an online questionnaire submitted to twenty-nine community entrepreneurs from various regions in Italy. The cross-case study analysis allowed to examine the research subjects within their contexts. The principal research tool was a semistructured interview. It was face-to-face and each interview lasted an average of 31 minutes. In total, eighty-seven interviews were collected with co-operative founders, workers, local partners, and citizens, then transcribed, and analysed using

Nvivo software. Alongside these interviews, there were notes from talks with local citizens, mostly collected during the fieldwork. They consisted of opinions on the community, ideas on local community co-operatives, and whether or not there was friction between the co-operatives and other community members. The fieldwork took place between August 2018 and January 2019. At the beginning of this research project (Autumn, 2017), *Legacoop* and *Confcooperative* (main Italian co-operatives' confederations) estimated community co-operatives to be around seventy organizations evenly distributed across all regions. The analysis considers organizations at various stages of their life cycles. Results show co-operatives in the central steps of this life cycle—start-up, growth, and maturity (Steven, 2001). A further element for the selection was the location of the co-operatives. To allow a wider comparison, diverse cases from rural and urban contexts were considered and co-operatives from North, Central, and South Italy. Based on these limitations, the research involves those co-operatives that expressed availability for the investigation (Table 1).

## Findings from the online questionnaire

The online questionnaire allowed the collection of a consistent amount of data about a considerable share of the national population of community co-operatives. Table 2 reports the main characteristics of the sample size of twenty-nine community co-operatives.

The majority of these co-operatives are founded by informal groups of citizens (twenty-four of twenty-nine). Hence, the idea of funding a community co-operative can also emerge from a collaboration among organizations, public and private, that decide to formalize their partnership by generating another entity with the specific aim of enhancing community development. Therefore, it is possible to see how these co-operatives confirm a certain trend as bottom-up civic initiatives (Table 3).

The data reveals that the local population had very low participation (this term refers to the number of official members of the organizations) in the co-operative enterprises. In twelve cases, the percentages were below 1 percent, and in only four cases, they were above 10 percent. Considering that three regional laws[1] require a minimum of 10 percent of local residents—referring to the municipality—as official members of the local community co-operative, this participation can be considered low. This is an important topic in the national debate about what defines a 'community co-operative'. Is it the mission or the share of local population enrolled in it? There is no

1 Abruzzo, Basilicata and Puglia regions.

**Table 1** Main Information on case studies

| Co-operative | Location (municipality/region/area) | Setting | Business area | Life-cycle stage | Fieldwork date |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brigì | Mendatica, Liguria, North Italy | Rural | Tourism accommodation | Start-up | August 2019 |
| Ri-maflow | Trezzano sul Naviglio, Lombardia, North Italy | Urban | Manufacturing, Craft, Food, | Growth/Maturity | September/October 2019 |
| Anversiamo | Anversa degli Abruzzi, Abruzzo, Central Italy | Rural | Tourism, Agriculture | Start-up | November 2019 |
| La Paranza | Napoli, Campania, South Italy | Urban | Tourism, Heritage, Tutelage, Cultural Activities | Maturity | January 2019 |
| Post-modernissimo | Perugia, Umbria, Central Italy | Urban | Movie theatre | Maturity | January 2019 |

**Table 2** Main characteristics of the participants

| Geographical position | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| North | | | Centre | | | | | South & Islands | | |
| 10 | | | 13 | | | | | 6 | | |
| Legal Form | | | | | | | | | | |
| Agriculture Co-op | | Workers Co-op | | | Service Co-op | | | Social Co-op | | |
| 1 | | 15 | | | 4 | | | 9 | | |
| Size | | | | | | | | | | |
| Micro (Fewer than 10 members) | | Small (From 10 to 49 members) | | | Medium (From 50 to 249 members) | | | Large (Over 250 members) | | |
| 4 | | 16 | | | 7 | | | 2 | | |
| Year of Foundation | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1991 | 1999 | 2001 | 2003 | 2008 | 2011 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 10 | 2 |

**Table 3** Members of community co-operatives and local population

| No. of respondent s | Members | Town | Local population | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 252 | Gaverina Terme (BG) | 855 | 29.47% |
| 2 | 55 | Ventasso (RE) | 4130 | 1.33% |
| 3 | 14 | Mendatica (IM) | 180 | 7.77% |
| 4 | 11 | Ventasso (RE) | 4130 | 0.26% |
| 5 | 76 | Campo di Giove (AQ) | 793 | 0.95% |
| 6 | 29 | Corfinio (AQ) | 1025 | 2.82% |
| 7 | 46 | Fontecchio (AQ) | 342 | 13.45% |
| 8 | 269 | Melpignano (LE) | 2211 | 12.16% |
| 9 | 12 | Chianche (AV) | 480 | 2.5% |
| 10 | 12 | Borgorose (RI) | 4435 | 0.27% |
| 11 | 163 | Valle di Cadore (BL) | 1868 | 8.72% |
| 12 | 60 | Anversa degli Abruzzi (AQ) | 310 | 19.35% |
| 13 | 8 | Corniglio (PR) | 1842 | 0.43% |
| 14 | 72 | Ameglia (SP) | 4316 | 1.66% |
| 15 | 3 | Galeata (FC) | 2500 | 0.12% |
| 16 | 22 | Petrizzi (CZ) | 1103 | 1.99% |
| 17 | 6 | Beverino (SP) | 2350 | 0.25% |
| 18 | 13 | Comano Terme (TN) | 2963 | 0.43% |
| 19 | 58 | Demonte (CN) | 1959 | 2.96% |
| 20 | 75 | Sant'Onofrio (VV) | 3035 | 2.47% |
| 21 | 3 | Mamoiada (NU) | 2498 | 0.12% |
| 22 | 13 | Fiumefreddo Bruzio (CS) | 2918 | 0.44% |
| 23 | 12 | Montemonaco (AP) | 551 | 2.17% |
| 24 | 84 | Trequanda (SI) | 1228 | 6.84% |
| 25 | 42 | Follo (SP) | 6317 | 0.66% |
| 26 | 4 | Mulazzo (MS) | 2398 | 0.16% |
| 27 | 97 | Castell'zzara (GR) | 1408 | 6.88% |
| 28 | 77 | Castelnuovo Magra (SP) | 8381 | 0.91% |
| 29 | 19 | Corna Imagna (BG) | 925 | 2.05% |

Istat, 1 January 2020—Figure represents the total population of each municipality.

intention to give an answer here, but it is useful to consider the 10 percent because three regions have chosen it as a minimum requirement.

Nevertheless, the community co-operatives were greatly inclined to develop collaborations with other local entities. First, all respondents had at least two active collaborations with other local entities; second, they worked with the public (twenty-five of twenty-nine), private (twenty-five of twenty-nine), and the third sector (twenty-three of twenty-nine), sharing their common aims for the community. This could compensate for the lack of wide shares of the local population participating in co-operative memberships. Co-operative members considered their partners' support of key importance in their work for community development to understand problems (twenty-seven of twenty-nine) and new opportunities for development (twenty-eight of twenty-nine). Despite the great work for developing networks

**Table 4** Co-operators' age

| Age | Co-operators |
|---|---|
| 18–25 | 6 |
| 26–30 | 7 |
| 31–35 | 4 |
| 36–40 | 4 |
| 41–45 | 3 |
| 46–50 | 2 |
| 51–55 | 2 |
| 56–60 | 2 |
| 61–65 | 1 |
| 66–70 | 2 |
| 71–75 | 0 |
| 76–80 | 0 |
| Over 80 | 0 |

**Table 5** Co-operators' gender

| Female | Male |
|---|---|
| 15 | 18 |

around the community development project, a number of groups (fifteen of twenty-nine) experienced occurrences of friction and hostility by other residents. They express these 'frictions' as 'jealousy by other residents', 'non-comprehension of the intentions of the co-operative' and general 'distance in values, such as the activism for the community'. This represents a critical factor in the fulfilment of the community development objectives because these issues can compromise the reputation of local community co-operatives.

## Results from the cross-case studies analysis

The fieldwork on the five community co-operatives reveals very similar findings. Furthermore, through the fieldwork and semistructured interviews, the in-depth analysis made it possible to gather more complex information on social dynamics that constitute the phenomenon. Data on community entrepreneurs (thirty-three interviewees) provides specific information about the people behind these projects, their socio-cultural backgrounds, and the dynamics that led them to start up a community co-operative.

Tables 4–6 show the main characteristic of the thirty-three co-operators engaged for the case study part of this research. Even if there is not a full homogeneity in these features, it is possible to observe interesting elements.

**Table 6** Co-operators' education

| Level of education | Number of co-operators |
|---|---|
| Primary school | 0 |
| Middle school | 4 |
| High school | 17 |
| Bachelor degree (4 years) | 3 |
| Bachelor degree (3 years) | 7 |
| Master | 2 |
| PhD | 0 |

**Table 7** Previous experiences in third-sector organisations

| | Co-op founders | Co-op workers/members | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Never | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Few | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Frequent | 9 | 9 | 18 |
| In the past | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| Total | 16 | 17 | 33 |

First, they are mostly under forty (twenty-one out of thirty-three) and with a high level of education (twelve out of thirty-three with university degree but seven co-operators categorized with 'high school level' were university students in the process of obtaining their degree). There is a considerable gender balance between male and female; in two co-operatives, the main leaders are women.

In three of five cases (Brigí, La Paranza, Post-Modernissimo), the well-established social groups pre-dated the generation of the co-operative idea. Regarding the other two cases (AnversiAmo & Ri-maflow), the social groups were created with the co-operatives but people involved already had relationships with each other. The groups' homogeneity concerns age (Brigì members: range twenty–twenty-five; La Paranza: twenty-five–thirty; Post-modernissimo: thirty–thirty-five; Ri-maflow: forty–fifty. Only AnversiAmo has a broad range, from twenty to fifty). Another element of homogeneity is the subdivision of educational levels: Brigì has a predominance of university graduates, as well as Post-modernissimo. Contrarily, the other three co-operatives comprise a majority of people with high-school level education, and there are four with middle school level in Ri-maflow. The inclination to be active members of the third sector, even before the co-operative foundation, is a very common element among all the case studies, as Table 7 shows.

What motivated all these groups was their commitment to their communities, derived from values embedded in the founders' cultural

backgrounds. All members explained that they consider collaboration, self-activation, and solidarity to be fundamental values, and without those, they believe it is not possible to collaborate and it is necessary to know and trust each other to develop a project. Many of them (twenty-six out of thirty-three) consider these values as part of their families' education. This sharing of values and views on a problem is the pivotal element in determining towards which other subjects in the communities the co-operatives address their attention. First, other members or partners involved in the projects have already had personal relationships with the founders. Second, they have all had experiences of collaboration before the co-operative start-up; therefore, they already share mutual trust. Third, they believe that the co-operatives' approach—based on civic activism and private initiatives—is the most adequate solution to those problems identified by the founders.

In all five cases, the leadership of a few individuals—normally one to three—was the fundamental factor for triggering the whole process. Leaders activated their personal networks of relationships within groups of friends, engaging other subjects on whom they relied owing to similar values and prior, common, positive experiences. This formed the founder groups within which the community development idea was expanded. First, they all shared a strong bond and commitment to the local communities. Second, they all agreed on the prioritization of certain issues, such as local problems, based on their views. Considering the absence of economic opportunities for development, the necessity for urban and social regeneration, or the idea to re-open a theatre, for example, can be a need for the community, but it is, firstly, an expression of founders' groups that elaborate on these ideas within their restricted groups and then propose their interpretations and, most importantly, their view of solutions to the rest of the community. Third, they strongly believed that public intervention and the private market could not be the solution and that the only way forward was through community self-activation. Fourth, they found agreement with local residents and organizations that shared the same values and views on issues and solutions. Indeed, twenty-three out of thirty-three members interviewed declared they have involved their personal relationships (family and friends) in the co-operative project; e.g. asking them to support fundraising or to become clients. Exemplarily, AnversiAmo is based on two preestablished co-operatives; Brigì members rely considerably on their parents' support; supporters of same political area are sought out for Ri-maflow; and people and organizations in the local third sector network are required for La Paranza and Post-modernissimo.

Partners (thirty-five interviewees were categorized as 'partners') were generally local subjects (twenty-four of thirty-five) and were mostly connected to founders through personal relationships (eighteen of thirty-five).

Otherwise, they discovered the co-operatives through other channels (word-of-mouth, social media, and local newspapers). The majority of the partners joined the co-operative project during the start-up phase (twenty-three of thirty-five), directly contributing to the resource acquisition. All partners shared the aims, objectives, and values of the co-operatives (thirty-five out of thirty-five). Of the thirty-five partners, thirty-three personally trusted the community entrepreneurs. Furthermore, thirty-one of the thirty-five strongly believed that the community co-operatives contributed to local development. Partners reported that they enjoy important benefits, both economic and social, from the collaboration with the co-operatives.

Despite the considerable capacity of these co-operatives to create valuable community development projects, the fieldwork in each context has revealed significant criticisms related to conflicts and friction with other subjects. In every community, entrepreneurs have witnessed, and their partners have confirmed, issues related to divergences with other residents and/or organizations. Furthermore, notes from conversations with other residents and comments from interviewees reveal that most of these issues were personal oppositions, particularly in the rural contexts where communities are smaller and social interactions more frequent. Brigì's members report that many residents complain about the co-operative work just because they are 'jealous'—according to some interviewees—of the co-operative success and fame in national newspapers. Certain residents consider this a consequence of old frictions between families in the village; some of them are more active and historically involved in local associations, and their sons have inherited this attitude and founded the co-operative. AnversiAmo has witnessed the same dynamics; furthermore, the idea to create a community co-operative was part of the electoral programme of one of the founders and the current mayor—according to the interviewees—is not very collaborative for this reason. Ri-maflow has a clear political position in the far-left; therefore, it has had conflicts with residents from other political areas, particularly the mayor and his supporters. The strong political spirit of this initiative is often a barrier to connect it to certain shares of the local population. Ri-maflow mostly collaborates with organizations in the left-wing area that foster values of antifascism, alternative economies, and sustainability. Some residents in Rione Sanità believed that La Paranaza only favours those who have participated in the parish activities. Although this is not evidenced, it is clear that the network relies mostly on founders' personal connections in the local third sector and with certain business activities. In any case, they always try to expand their relations. For Post-modernissimo, the principal frictions are with market competitors, but these did not affect relationships with its neighbours. The co-operative tries to remain apolitical but its main connection with the third sector is in the area of alternative economies and

solidarity, very close to the left-wing sphere. Despite these accusations being either true or false, an important point is made: not all the communities are involved and someone can feel left behind, but this does not happen for a voluntary and conscious decision of the co-operatives: this is how networks work. Those who are eligible and capable of staying in specific networks can also benefit from them, as explained in the next section.

## Discussion

The results from the online questionnaire and the cross-case study analysis present empirical data on the structuration of community co-operatives offering new insights regarding the phenomenon. If we follow Putnam *et al.*'s (1993); Putnam's (2000) interpretation, the results can appear as the logical consequence of civic activism, which operates for the common interest. Citizens gather to collaborate and through their networks—based on reciprocity and solidarity—they can enhance the general well-being of their communities. The point is that this interpretation partially describes the reality. Contrarily, considering Bourdieu (1977, 1979), community entrepreneurs are a specific facet of their communities who engage subjects with social similarities. Nevertheless, this partiality is overcome by co-operators' capacity to establish networks with local communities; even for this aspect, it is possible to trace common patterns that direct co-operators' attention towards organizations with social similarities.

The first main result is the common social characteristics that Italian community entrepreneurs share; they predominantly have a pronounced inclination towards activism. Indeed, they had already been members of other third-sector organizations before the co-operativism experience. They share common cultural backgrounds and bring an already existing sense of trust and collaboration or, in other words, social capital within the new co-operative. This is partially what Oesterle *et al.* (2004) explain about participation in volunteerism; the inclination for civic activism is determined by multiple factors that vary from one context to another. Furthermore, Ubels *et al.* (2019) demonstrate that socio-economic characteristics influence the commitment towards community development initiatives; this lack of interest can be explained with less attachment to the local community, diverse needs, different perceptions, and vision. As Bourdieu (1979, 1986) explained, social groups generate a strategy to compete in social fields according to their common cultural backgrounds, which recognize the symbolic values behind determined social actions. As described by Borch *et al.* (2008), family background has an important influence in determining the entrepreneurial carrier. Some of the interviewees report that their families have been the main source of inspiration for their choice to start up a

co-operative business, as well as Bourdieu (1977) identifying similar education as a key element in shaping people's social behaviour. In this sense, these community entrepreneurs got together because they all agreed on the values of solidarity and community commitment, which is embedded in their cultural background, recognizing the symbolic value embedded in active citizenship. They forged the community development project on these symbolic values. Community entrepreneurs established networks with other subjects already in their social networks, who shared the same cultural backgrounds, and recognized the symbolic value.

Furthermore, founders' connections allowed a co-operative to have a pre-existing portfolio of social relationships with the community, which also was not neutral but deeply influenced by anyone who was trusted by co-operative founders. As Kleinhans *et al.* (2019) explain, CBEs use relationships to acquire assets and resources. Therefore, if they ask for support in their social networks, where they can rely on their social capital, then they will respond primarily to those who have sustained their project instead of others who refuse to join the initiative. Again, Bourdieu (1977) argues that subjects who recognized themselves as 'similar' on the base of common social identities exchange resources to strength their networks. This implies that the sharing remains within these networks because subjects are sure to invest resources into them with others who have same values, visions, and goals.

The present analysis explains how community entrepreneurs share common social characteristics that are fundamental factors in their decision to start up a community co-operative. Moreover, the development of relationships with local partners shows how they are not simply determined by the community development goals but mostly rely on the personal reciprocal relationships between subjects. Consequently, the community development process is influenced by those pre-existing relationships that tend to engage determined subjects in the community instead of others. As previous research points out (Peredo and James Chrisman, 2006; Borch *et al.*, 2008; Mori and Sforzi, 2018), it is important for CBEs to create a local environment capable of supporting their work of community development. It is important to add how community entrepreneurs develop these connections, on the basis of their social capital, thus towards whom the attention is directed. Indeed, founders, members, and most of the partners of co-operatives already knew each other at the beginning of their projects, which means an inherent partiality in their composition since the first steps. This element stresses the limits in Putnam's view. Whoever was more engaged in these civic organizations already had a strong cultural background in social and solidarity initiatives. This reveals a fundamental aspect of the community development process; only certain residents had the inclination

to be part of them. These were subjects with similar ages, level of education, and—most importantly—similar cultural backgrounds. Bauman (2001) held the view that the idea of community in contemporary fluid society is an artefact that is lived only by those who construct it. Results from this research show how the idea of a collaborative community engaged in the co-operative project is the main view, embedded with symbolic power, used by community entrepreneurs to attract other people and resources.

Furthermore, many community co-operatives witnessed friction with other residents and/or organizations. This aspect is mostly underrepresented in the literature on community development and CBEs. Considering Bourdieu's (1979) interpretation of social actions, various groups (members and supporters of co-operatives) in the social fields (the social and public space of the community) competed to obtain the affirmation of their symbolic value, which was substantivized in the public acknowledgement of one solution for local issues.

## Conclusion

Considering the aim of this paper, the analysis of these results seeks to explain how the perspective on the CBEs phenomenon can change when the social–capital framework mutates and these variations can show new aspects of them. Keeping the focus on dynamics and re-examining the mainstream framework can help advance the debate on this phenomenon. Community entrepreneurs sincerely believe in activism and reciprocity and this is the reason why they can only involve other residents with the same beliefs and cultural backgrounds. These elements of their social profiles directly influence the development of networks to sustain the co-operatives and to address their community mission.

This analysis aims to shed light on these limitations and to encourage scientific and political debate, not to rely only on community development and CBEs as unique solutions to local issues. These are groups of people who embed solidarity and collaboration in their cultural background because they have learnt from their families and former experiences in the third sector. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the inclination to be an active citizen is shared by all the community members. Consequently, community development projects engage those who want to be engaged, leaving an open question concerning those who are not part of these networks for various reasons; e.g. political opposition, personal frictions, or values incompatibility. This does not necessarily imply a failure of their projects, but it is important to change the perspective on the phenomenon and to accept the fact that community-based enterprises (CBEs) are an expression of small groups of people with pre-existing social capital shared with the

partners in their local networks. 'Community' means a constructed network of other subjects who share the same values of self-activation. They can realize important results for their communities but only because they have a sense of solidarity. This means that mostly depends on how they want to extend the benefit to others who are not in their networks: it is not an automatic mechanism. This underlines the necessity to not rely only on these initiatives but to sustain further initiatives for community well-being, even from other agents; e.g. public authorities.

Future research on this topic can more deeply analyse the consequences of this network construction and assess whether or not the residents who are not part of these networks might suffer social exclusion. The chief limitations of this research are the consideration of just one national context and the reductionism to only certain community co-operatives. Furthermore, a broader social-impact evaluation can unearth more about whether these co-operatives also benefit subjects outside their networks. This analysis could be enhanced in the future through the comparison of more international cases.

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