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Italian Community Co-operatives: Structuration of Community Development Processes in Italy

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ABSTRACT



Italy is famous worldwide for its co-operative sector, and this firm model has proven to be efficacious in redressing many social inequalities over the past two centuries. This paper aims to examine how local communities in diverse regions have adapted this traditional form to the contemporary trend of bottom-up community development processes. Furthermore, the paper compares the Italian initiatives with the international literature on community co-operatives and assesses to which extent similarities and differences are viewable. The qualitative analysis considers 7 co-operatives in various areas of Italy, and analyses result from 15 semi-structured interviews with managers. Findings show the intense work undertaken before the co-operatives' registration, the negotiation of purposes and objectives with external partners, how founder groups have a key role in determining each firm's approach to local development, and how further networks with external subjects are deeply influence the co-operatives' work.

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KEYWORDS Community enterprise; community co-operative; social economy; socio-economic regeneration

Introduction

The community co-operative is a specific form of a community-based enterprise (Walzer 2021), this is a democratic-managed firm that allows the collective ownership by members of a community to generate resources to enhance the community's interest (Lang and Roessl 2011; Vieta and Lionais 2015). Generally, the mission is fulfilled by the accomplishment of socio-economic development goals in line with a broader sense of community development (Wilkinson & Quarter, 1996; Majee and Hoyt 2011). In the last 40 years, there have been numerous initiatives in many Western countries which can go under the definition of 'community co-operatives'; moreover, there has been much

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academic debate around them (Booth and Fortis 1984; Brown 1997; Zeuli and Radel 2004; Calderwood and Davies 2006; Frith, McElwee, and Somerville 2009; Cabras 2014; Tarhan 2015; Kleinhans, Bailey, and Lindbergh 2019).

Italy has witnessed a late appearance of the 'community co-operatives' phenomenon, compared to other countries in Europe. Only in the last 10 years, community co-operatives have appeared mostly in response to economic crisis and state withdrawal (Borzaga and Zandonai 2015; Mori and Sforzi 2018). Hence, academic research has begun to pay more attention to this phenomenon (Bartocci and Picciaia 2013; Bandini, Medei, and Travaglini 2014; Tricarico 2014; Salento and Rucco 2018; Dumont 2019; Mastronardi and Romagnoli 2020). The key question is to what extent are the Italian community co-operatives similar to those elsewhere. Furthermore, previous studies of Italian community co-operatives mostly examine their role from an economic perspective; however, the main limitation of these interpretations is their reductive sociological perspective on the phenomenon. Previous research has focused upon the organizational structure, but the aim here is to explore more fully how these co-operatives relate to their local communities and the social milieus in which they operate.

This paper proposes a different perspective on the phenomenon looking at community co-operatives as the product of local community social relations (J Defourny 2001; Craig et al. 2011). This offers a much clearer understanding of the emergence and functioning of community co-operatives than merely analyzing organizational structure. Co-operatives are deeply rooted in their socio-cultural contexts and this determines considerable variations between one place and another in relation to contextual factors (Lang and Roessl 2011). Consequently, it is relevant to assess the specificities of the Italian phenomenon, in relation to its local contexts, and how a broader research perspective can reveal more about these organizations. Moreover, this paper responds to the necessity to improve the interconnection between social sciences, economics, and business ethics to comprehend how economic problems and social economics processes are integrally connected to other dimensions of social life (Dolfsma et al. 2012).

This article poses two main research questions, do Italian community co-operatives share characteristics with the more consolidated initiatives in other countries? And, what are the social processes and dynamics behind the creation of a community co-operative? This research adopts a qualitative approach to examine diverse co-operatives, employing a cross-case study methodology (Yin 2009). The article selects seven community co-operatives and presents their evolution from an embryonic idea to the maturity phase. Through this approach it is possible to better comprehend the dynamics antecedent the co-operatives' formalization – such as how founders join together and establish connections with certain local subjects.

Next, the theoretical section reviews the literature on community co-operatives at both international and Italian levels; this allows to identify shared international characteristics and the state-of-art on the Italian phenomenon. The methodology section presents the case studies and the research structure, including the codes used to examine the interviews transcriptions. Findings are organized following the life cycle of non-profit organizations (Steven 2001) and each stage is discussed on the base of data from the work field. The paper points out the possibility of better understanding community co-operatives as collective actions if a wider perspective is adopted.

Community co-operatives: international and Italian contexts

Generally, ‘community enterprises’ are intended as firms with a straightforward mission toward local communities, a consistent social impact, and collaborative networks with local stakeholders and partners (Somerville and McElwee 2011; Majee and Hoyt 2011; Bailey 2012; Walzer 2021). The ‘community co-operative’ model enriches the community enterprise with a further element, the collective ownership and management by members of communities where they operate (Booth and Fortis 1984; Brown 1997; Frith, McElwee, and Somerville 2009; Lang and Roessl 2011; Majee and Hoyt 2011). In addition, community co-operatives specifically target local communities as their main beneficiaries, they work not only to satisfy members’ needs but also to enhance the community socio-economic development (Booth & Fortis, 1984; Wilkinson & Quarter, 1996; Brown, 1997).

Community co-operatives can also appear in deprived socio-economic contexts in both rural and urban areas; they adopt diverse strategies to improve these conditions such as the creation or regeneration of local assets (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Lang and Roessl 2011; Bailey 2012), creation of new businesses and consequently more job positions and indirect economic impact on other local businesses (Wilkinson & Quarter, 1996; Brown, 1997) and providing basic services in rural and remote areas (Zeuli and Radel 2005; Calderwood and Davies 2006; Peredo and Chrisman 2006; Majee and Hoyt 2011; Cabras 2014; Giovannini 2015). Other forms of community economic development can be activated through the provision of social services (Lemon and Lemon 2003; Battilana et al. 2015), management of commons and natural resources (Frith et al., 2009) or production of sustainable energy (Tarhan 2015).

Clearly, these organizations do not exist in a vacuum, they are results of leadership guidance and can have a broad-base support from social movements (Booth & Fortis, 1984; Vieta & Lionais, 2015). The purpose of building a stronger community economy leads these organizations to develop relationships and collaborations with other local subjects, both public, private or social economy (Wilkinson & Quarter, 1996; Ridley-Duff and Bull 2019).

The Italian community co-operatives phenomenon

Introducing the Italian context to explain the specific object of the research, it is important to specify that in this context it is more appropriate to use the term 'third sector' instead of 'social economy'. Despite both concepts have many similarities and encompass many identical organizational forms (Monzon Campos and Chaves 2012; Jacques Defourny 2013) the 'third sector' has a specific legal definition in the Italian context.¹ Therefore, in the Italian context, this has become the main term to refer to this area; consequently, it is legally and culturally appropriate to use it in explaining social facts concerning community co-operatives, social enterprises and other forms of social and solidarity economy. Although embryonic experiences of community co-operatives can be found at the end of nineteenth century, for the production of electric energy in remote alps valleys, this co-operative model has never proliferated (Mori 2017). Only in the last 10 years there has been a growing trend homogeneously distributed above the whole national territory (Mori and Sforzi 2018; Bianchi and Vieta 2019). As Borzaga and Zandonai (2015) point out, two factors explain the rise of community co-operatives: a new wave of participation in civil society, linked to the increasing attention towards active citizenship for community commitment; and the importance acquired by entrepreneurship – not only as a creator of economic value, but also as a promoter of positive effects on local communities.

As observed by Bianchi (2021), community co-operatives can be considered as innovative solutions that try to fill in the gap left by the old and solid organizations of the twenty century (e.g. local branch of national political parties). These had the capacity to aggregate people and guide bottom-up social forces, with general visions, towards specific goals for the local development. With the emerge of the liquid society (Bauman 2000) citizens have searched for new forms of grass-roots social aggregation to organize their force to solve local problems. Particularly, these co-operative appear in those areas that more suffer the absence of local services and infrastructures such as the mountain and rural areas (Berti and D'Angelo 2018; Pezzi and Urso 2018). The main reason that leads local citizens to create self-reliant solutions to manage local resources and start-up businesses able to generate resources for the local development is the absence of alternative answers from both the private and the public sector (Mastronardi and Romagnoli 2020). Consequently, Italian community co-operatives not only try to propose a new model of local sustainable development but also promote new forms of social participation and aggregation (Bartocci and Picciaia 2013; Mori and Sforzi 2018; Scalese, Sforzi, and Stocco 2020). Due to their non-profit nature and the capacity to govern

¹ In 2017, with the legislative decree n.117, the Italian Government defined the 'Third sector', its role and objectives in the society, and all the legal forms that compose it e.g. charity, association, social enterprise, foundation, committee.

collective actions through democratic mechanisms, community co-operatives have the capacity to foster social participation in the community development process, a concept relatively new for the Italian culture (Arena and Iaione 2015; Mori and Sforzi 2018; Rocchi 2020).

Italian community co-operatives operate in various sectors such as agriculture, cultural activities, commerce, energy production, tourism, regenerating local assets and favouring the culture of active citizenship for the governance of commons (Bartocci & Picciaia, 2013; Bandini et al., 2014; Tricarico, 2014; Mori & Sforzi, 2018; Salento & Rucco, 2018; Dumont, 2019; Mastronardi & Romagnoli, 2020). Collaboration with public, private and third sectors is also recognized as a common trend among recent forms of community co-operatives in Italy (Bartocci & Picciaia, 2013; Bandini et al., 2014; Tricarico, 2014; Teneggi and Zandonai, 2017; Mori & Sforzi, 2018).

As it is possible to see, the literature has already presented trends and features of Italian community co-operatives; albeit the fundamental contribution, the analysis necessity further results to improve the definition of this phenomenon. Principally previous studies focus attention on the dynamics behind services management and benefits-sharing with communities; secondarily, they recognize the presence of local networks with other entities but do not attach sufficient importance to these connections. In addition, these examinations consider co-operatives when they are already established and operating in their territories; thus, they analyse the consequences of their work for communities but underestimate the processes behind their formation. It is important to expand the vision on community co-operatives and consider how relationships with external contexts influence them before and after their formation (Bianchi and Vieta 2020). As Lang and Roessl (2011) point out, the governance mechanisms and functions of community co-operatives are understandable in relation to their contexts. Moreover, considering the deep roots of these organizations in their communities (Fulton and Ketilson, 1992; Zeuli and Radel, 2005; Somerville and McElwee, 2011), it is important to know how and why local residents have chosen this solution rather than others. These considerations have led the research to adopt an approach that focuses more on the embedment of these collective firms in their social, cultural and economic contexts (Granovetter, 1985). Consequently, the analysis investigates two research questions: do Italian community co-operatives share characteristics with the more consolidated initiatives in other countries? And, what are the social processes and dynamics behind the creation of a community co-operative?

Community co-operatives as outputs of collective processes

This research adopts the structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) as a framework to examine the research object. As Steiner et al. (2021) suggest in their analysis

on social enterprises, Giddens' theory can support the examination on the generation of this type of organization and their relationships with the social contexts where they operate. Furthermore, (Ridley-Duff, 2018) highlights how Giddens' theory can help 'to theorise how social entrepreneurs dis-embed and re-embed their ideas to change social structures' (p. 328). As explained above, community co-operatives share many characteristics with social enterprises and both belong to the third sector; therefore, it is possible to translate the consideration of Giddens' theory to these forms of community development enterprise. Considering the debate on community co-operative, subjects involved in the creation of these organizations are deeply embedded in their local socio-economic contexts, as well as, in the social networks that allow the constitution of these co-operatives. Structuration is the result of human activities; subjects act moving between the duality of social structure and social system. In this process of development, neither the human agent nor society is regarded as having primacy. The human agency expresses the individual action in the social system but it is influenced by the social structure (rules that restrict actions and resources that facilitate them) where the subject is embedded (Lamsal, 2012).

Therefore, the structuration theory can support the examination of their social practices as agents in their context and show how these practices evolve into rules and organizational structures such as those of the co-operative firms. It is important to consider that local social networks among people and other types of organizations are extremely important in the formation of co-operatives (Bianchi and Vieta, 2020).

Defourny (2013) offers an interesting perspective on the third sector, considering it as an ongoing process among different parts of society, in a continuous dialogue for devising solutions to social issues. Therefore, the perspective of an ongoing process assumes an interesting role in the examination of community co-operatives, because it can illustrate how they emerge from wider processes among diverse local actors interested in the development of their communities. Indeed, the work of community co-operatives can be defined as community development.

As MacPherson (2013) underlines, the 'concern for community' is a key part of co-operatives' DNA, but it has been undervalued for a long period. Community development is a process that assumes various forms, from the most informal and bottom-up, to the more structured and top-down (Henderson and Vercseg, 2010; Craig et al., 2011; Kenny et al., 2017). It begins with the recognition of a state-of-need in a community; faced with this situation, when a direct public intervention is not available or desired, community members can autonomously design self-reliant solutions to provide their necessities. These responses might involve permanent structures that can manage services and generate resources for sustaining the local population, and implementing other projects for the community's well-being (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993;

Wilkinson & Quarter, 1996; Craig et al., 2011; Somerville & McElwee, 2011). A further key element in the definition of community co-operatives, as a structure within community development processes is various local actors' involvement in co-operatives' creation and governance. A direct involvement in the formal structure of the co-operative is not necessary (Somerville & McElwee, 2011); nevertheless, the community development process requires collaborations among diverse actors and stakeholders, in order to adequately define issues and solutions on the basis of local residents' and organizations' knowledge (Henderson & Vercseg, 2010; Craig et al., 2011; Kenny et al., 2017). Therefore, mapping partners in these projects is a crucial step in the analysis of community development initiatives, in order to understand how they support and influence these initiatives. Consequently, looking at the research object from the combined theoretical perspective of structuration theory within community development processes can support the analysis of social dynamics behind the structured actions of these co-operatives and grasp those social dimensions that determine their origin, grow and functioning.

It is clear that the co-operative's formalization into an organizational structure is a stage in a longer process, with various actors involved. As stated above, it is important to examine how the organization works and manages services; yet it is also significant to comprehend the dynamics that lead to the creation of this structure, and then its relationships with the territory. As Steven (2001) indicates in her study on non-profit organizations' life cycle, each entity proceeds through a sequence of steps in its development. The first four stages of this cycle are of particular interest for this research:

- *Founding idea*, when the organizational idea appears.
- *Start-up*, when the idea becomes an organization.
- *Growth*, when the services become accepted and used, and they expand into the community.
- *Maturity*, when the organization is well established and has a reputation in the community.

By combining these stages with community development elements, it is possible to delineate the theoretical framework appropriate for this research. This allows the analysis to examine each step in the co-operatives' formation, from phases before the official registration towards the consolidation of their work in the community. In addition, the analysis also considers the partners' contribution in each phase.

Methodology

To find answers to research questions, the analysis considers a qualitative approach to investigate the Italian community co-operative phenomenon. To

achieve this goal, the research compare seven co-operatives in various Italian regions; the cross-case study methodology allows a comparison to be made among diverse case studies in different contexts, and to extrapolate key information in order to delineate common patterns in diverse cases. The case study methodology is primarily useful for studying subjects that are deeply inter-related with their contexts; as expressed above, it permits a consideration of surrounding conditions that directly influence the subjects under investigation (Yin, 2009). Following Gioia et al. (2013), people construct their organizational realities, therefore they are considered as 'knowledgeable agents' who know what they do and the reasons behind their thoughts and actions.

For gathering information, the research used semi-structured interviews as the main tool (Corbetta 2003). Questions deal with the main research topics, these are related to the history of each co-operative, reasons for their establishment, their main partners, and their relationships with co-operatives. As Eisenhardt (1989) explains, the case sampling aims to find subjects that can replicate or extend the theory the research wants to prove or sustain. Having defined a national population, assessed by national co-operative confederations experts in around 60 cases (Mori & Sforzi, 2018; Bianchi & Vieta, 2019). Sampling has to follow a distribution of variables that determine the diversification of the final cases study group (Eisenhardt, 1989). Common selection criteria for the sample are the co-operative legal form, the self-declaration on these organizations as 'community co-operative',² and the presence of networks with local partners. Along these, variation criteria are the differentiation of the geographical position, business area, size, and stage in the life cycle. Considering these criteria, the availability of selected participants, time and resources for the research, the analysis considers seven community co-operatives. These co-operatives have been selected for their peculiar work and the particularity of their approaches. Moreover, in Italy, few community co-operatives have already achieved a stage of 'growth' and 'maturity'; therefore, the pool of possibilities was defined to determine cases.

The study considers a total of 15 interviews recorded and transcribed. Interview set of questions covers main topics related to each stage of the life cycle and relationships with partners and stakeholders. Questions go through topics concerning the history of the co-operatives, local socio-economic issues, founders' aims and expectations, social dynamics related to each life-cycle phase. Using Nvivo, was the analysis of these interviews. Table 1 reports labels used for each stage of the organizations' life cycle. Each group of labels collects relevant information for the explanation of every step that community co-operatives, as non-profit entities, go through. Labels are the result of the literature review; considering that we already know many characteristics of

² In Italy, a national law is still under discussion, therefore there is no legal recognition of community co-operatives.

Table 1. Coding labels.

Stage	Labels
Founding idea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Issue</i>: problem(s) that triggered the process. • <i>Opportunity</i>: occasion(s) that inspired the project. • <i>Founders</i>: main information about people who had the idea. • <i>Project</i>: aspects of practical realization. • <i>Primary collaborations</i>: people and resources involved in the projects by founders.
Start-up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Assets</i>: resources used for the business activities. • <i>Services</i>: main business activities. • <i>Partnership</i>: relationships with local subjects.
Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Improvements</i>: service efficiency and management learning. • <i>Networks</i>: how new and already established relationships support co-operatives. • <i>Challenges</i>: how co-operatives overcome critical problems.
Maturity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Role in the community</i>: permanent services for the community well-being and their impact. • <i>Public profile</i>: how co-operative have consolidated their position in the community.

community co-operatives from international literature and the paper aims to assess to what extent these are present in the Italian context, the coding consequently defines a second order of categories (Gioia et al., 2013) and results from analysis examine whether or not empirical data fall into them.

The analysis adopts an iterative process (Yin, 2009); results come from the iterative comparison between the initial theoretical statements deriving from the literature analysis with data from each case study. Findings are reviewed with this statement and then compared among all the cases. Furthermore, coding labels in Table 1 guides the analysis of interviews transcription and allow to break down the narration flow into various categories related to each key topic for the research. This allowed the derivation of results and final conclusions on community co-operatives' evolution and structuration. Consequently, the cross-case study analysis was carried out considering information from each co-operative at every stage of their life cycle. In this way, the examination goes through every step of the projects' evolution considering data from the diverse sources allowing a constant comparison among case studies and highlighting considerable similarities and differences at every step.

Information about case studies

AnveriAmo: founded in 2018 in Anversa degli Aburzzi, a small village in the Abruzzo region, with the support of two local historical co-operatives. This firm aims to mix tourist activities, accommodation and agriculture intertwining business with local traditions.³ Anversa degli Abruzzi suffers a dramatic rate of depopulation and there are few local businesses that offer job possibilities to local. The co-operative aims to reverse this trend.

³ Local development plan 'The community co-operative AnveriAmo' presented to Fondo Sviluppo Concooperative.

Table 2. Main information on case studies.

Co-operative	Location (municipality/ region/area)	Setting	Business area	Life-cycle stage
AnversiAmo	Anversa degli Abruzzi Abruzzo Central Italy	Rural	Tourism Agriculture Accommodation	Start-up
Brigí	Mendatica Liguria North Italy	Rural	Tourism Accommodation	Growth
La Paranza	Napoli Campania South Italy	Urban	Archaeological Site management Cultural activities	Maturity
Melpignano	Melpignano Puglia South Italy	Rural	Energy production Water distribution	Maturity
Post-modernissimo	Perugia Umbria Central Italy	Urban	Movie theatre	Growth
Ri-Maflow	Trezzano sul Naviglio Lombardia North Italy	Urban	Manufacturing	Growth
Valle dei Cavalieri	Ramiseto Emilia-Romagna Central Italy	Rural	Tourism Retail Accommodation	Maturity

Brigí: founded in 2015 in Mendatica, a small village on mountains in the Liguria region, it has inherited the management of local adventure park, a B&B, and the tourist info point from a local association. Previous volunteers recognized the necessity to adopt a business model to improve the assets management. In accordance with the town hall, formal owner of all assets, they created the co-operative. The town hall supports these groups allowing the free use of these assets.⁴ As AnversiAmo, Brigí aims to save its village from the abandonment bringing back tourists and residents in the valley.

La Paranza: since 2010, this co-operative manages St Gennaro catacombs in Naples. This model fosters social innovation into cultural heritage conservation (Canestrino et al. 2019). Along with the tourism activities, the co-operative has promoted various social initiatives and urban regeneration projects in Rione Sanità, one of the most dis-advantaged neighbour in Naples.

Melpignano: In 2011, Melpignano town hall received funds for promoting a solar energy grid project; the main outcome has been the creation of this co-operative with subscriptions by 70 families as first shareholders (Bartocci & Picciaia, 2013). Then, the project has expanded its activities to water provision and management of the local park.

Post-Modernissimo: in 2014, in Perugia, four friends decided to re-open a historical movie theatre and involved other 100 citizens through a crowdfunding

⁴ 'Official agreement for the concession of tourist and sport structures of public property' Mendatica Town Hall 8th March 2016.

platform. After years, it is now a point of reference for quality cinema and part of a broader cultural movement for the neighbourhood regeneration through cultural activities and active citizenship.

Ri-maflo: after the shutdown of Maflo in 2010, a group of former workers began a fight for saving the firm and re-start production inspired by Argentinian social movements (Ressler and Azzellini, 2016). During the years, it has become a neuralgic centre for far-left groups in the Milan area and local social and cultural initiatives (Forno and Graziano, 2019).

Valle dei Cavalieri: the first and oldest community co-operative in Italy (founded in 1991); a group of young residents decided to save their village (Succiso) from the abandonment re-opening the local bar and grocery. Nowadays, this co-operative is a hub for local tourism and agriculture activities.

Findings

As explained in the theoretical framework section, the rationale of this examination is to design the analysis in terms of a process framework and to organize information within this structure.

The founding idea

Community co-operatives might involve many people throughout their evolution; but during this phase, the idea is shared within small groups. Founders are usually a small number of local people with pre-existing relationships and past common experiences in voluntarism and social aggregations.

We all grow up in this village. (Interview n° 2, Brigi)

We know each other since we were teenagers. (Interview n° 13, Post-Modernissimo)

We were a group of friends who decide to save the village. (Interview n° 15, Valle dei Cavalieri)

Voluntarism in other associations, engagement in parish groups, and political activism appear to be the most usual backgrounds among founder groups. Then, promoters attract those acquaintances in their social groups who prioritize certain community issues. We can see here how the background in the third sector is key because many of these founders have previous experiences in this and can bring these expertise into the new project to shape the community mission on the basis of the co-operative values.

Before the co-operative, we were all members of an association that we funded. (Interview n° 10, La Paranza)

The founding idea emerges when the community confronts a negative condition and/or a development possibility. Examples of the former case are the

closure of a fundamental business for the community (Post-modernissimo; Rimaflo; Valle dei Cavalieri), or derelict socio-economic conditions experienced by the community (AnversìAmo; La Paranza).

In 2010, the former owner decided to relocate the firm in Poland leaving 300 workers unemployed. (Interview n° 4, Ri-Maflo)

Differently, a project can take advantage of new options offered by the context or by external factors (Brigì; Melpignano).

The municipality won European funds throughout a regional call for sustainable development project and the co-operative was created to realize this project. (Interview n° 14, Melpignano)

Promoters interpret their founding ideas through values such as civic activism, altruism, mutuality, solidarity and localism. They see citizens' self-activation as the most feasible way to deal with the absence of public interventions, and market-related disinterest or speculation. When faced with these conditions, some members of the community decide to take action to reverse the existing conditions. They acquire the role of leaders who share the idea with acquaintances with whom they have strong relationships, common values and backgrounds. This first small group generates the basis for developing the co-operative project. This might not be the predefined final form for the initiatives; but from the first stage, promoters understand that solutions must be permanent, involving a stable income that will ensure the continuity of their ideas. Therefore, the co-operative appears as the best solution that embodies the founders' key values.

For obtaining local residents' support, promoters point to the centrality of certain local resources, such as commons, as key parts of their communities' identity. Local cultures, traditions, natural commons, art heritage, and public spaces are targeted as possible assets for the co-operatives; founders state the intention to incorporate them into their hybrid social enterprise structure.

We have to preserve local history and ancient crafts sharing them with people. (Interview n° 8, AnversìAmo)

Our local environment is the main asset, we want to promote a slow approach to local tourism. (Interview n° 3, Brigì)

The following step in this phase is the assessment of the project's feasibility, designing a possible business plan, and most importantly, the community development objectives. Since its inception, each project clearly states its intention to be a community development initiative; therefore, founders immediately begin to evaluate possible partners and share the idea with them, because they want to be advocated by key community actors from the projects' early stages. This decision seems to have a dual benefit that all groups acknowledge. First, it is useful for screening potential supporters for the start-up phase;

second, it helps to show founders' genuine intentions to others and also to share decisions and planning with external subjects. This first enlargement helps to circulate the idea of a community co-operative among local residents. Organization of public events to share the project ideas is also another common element (AnversiAmo, Brigí, Melpignano, Post-modernissimo, Valle dei Cavalieri).

After the first two public events for launching the co-operative project, many people decided to join the project. (Interview n° 1, Brigí)

We organized a public event for explaining the project to all the residents. (Interview 7, AnversiAmo)

These public moments contribute to strengthening the community spirit; founders aim to embody this within their projects by discussing these ideas with local residents from the beginning and inviting them to contribute to the projects in various ways. Thus, these preliminary discussions and debates help the founders to assess their possibilities of taking the project to the next level.

Start-up

After the first phase of discussion and planning, which takes between six months and one year, according to the participants' experiences, the founder groups are ready to register their co-operatives and begin their activities. This happens when promoters find a good response from local communities. This can assume various forms; mostly it is expressed through a membership subscription to the co-operative, which provides it with a first pool of financial resources. Another key step towards the decision to start up the co-operative is the collaboration of local authorities. Although not all cases present collaborations with public institutions since their early stages (Post-modernissimo; La Paranza), and someone has conflictual relations with them (Ri-maflow), nonetheless such partnerships can be fundamental.

We have never had the necessity to create a special partnership with the town hall, we deal with it as a normal firm. (Interview 12, Post-Modernissimo)

The political force that currently supports the mayor is openly in conflict with us; they do not share our political project. We think there are also hidden interests which determine this decision but we do not these. (Interview 5, Ri-Maflow)

Assets regeneration has become a strategic issue for the renewal of many areas, particularly in urban settings (Ponzini and Vani 2012; Gastaldi and Camerin 2015). Therefore, the collaboration between the two parts assumes an official status; the public authority becomes a key stakeholder within the governance of the co-operative. These quotes explain various types of collaborations.

Local town hall has not funds and staff for running the football pitch, therefore, it is closed; we are negotiating a deal for managing it. (Interview n°8, AnversiAmo)

We used the former primary school as hub for our activities, the town hall has supported us not asking for a rent. (Interview 15, Valle dei Cavalieri)

Local authorities have insufficient financial or organizational capacity to keep the asset functioning. In the case of AnversiAmo, the town hall was considering assigning it the management of a local football pitch, which would otherwise remain closed. Brigi runs an adventure park inside a public park, and has to keep it well maintained; moreover, it manages a B&B previously run by an association that did not have enough volunteers to properly use this asset. Therefore, the co-operative, with the agreement of the town hall, is the B&B's official owner and has replaced the association with a more functional business structure. Valle dei Cavalieri has its main hub in the former village primary school; here, the co-operative has opened a small grocery shop and a bar for the local population – these are the only local businesses in the village. It also runs a restaurant, a B&B, and the info point for the regional park where the village is located. Melpignano co-operative is a particular case because it was born from the local administration's initiatives for the installation of solar panels around the village. After some years, the town hall has assigned to the co-operative the management of a public park; it can run the bar inside the park.

The town hall cannot afford the cost of maintenance so we have this agreement, we do not pay the rent for the bar inside the park and we take care of green areas and the playground. (Interview 14, Melpignano)

Therefore, it is possible to see how the start-up phase already involves other actors external to the founder groups. These partners have a fundamental role, without which the co-operatives cannot begin their work. Mostly, shared objectives with local partners are defined before the co-operative's registration, and this stage becomes a formal structuration of precedent intentions already established.

Growth

During their first years, community co-operatives learn how to manage their assets and run their businesses, adjusting them to market necessities and locals' input. Co-operators devote most of their efforts to implementing internal mechanisms, organizational efficiency, and marketing impact, to position the co-operative within specific market niches. Clients have to discover the co-operatives' products and services, and co-operators recalibrate their actions on the basis of the first feedbacks received.

With an economic stability, it is possible to think about more investments in the community. (Interview 14, Melpignano)

These are years of economic fragility until the achievement of break-even, which then allows businesses to easily operate their strategies. Since the start-up phase, co-operators witness both great support from part of their communities, and uncertainty about their intentions from other community members.

It has been a matter of inserting the project inside the dynamics and social equilibrium in this village, which is not an easy task. (Interview n° 1, Brigi)

During this phase there is an expansion of co-operatives' networks, to reach new partners for both commercial and social purposes; therefore, they look at both the private and third sectors. After the co-operative's registration and establishment of the business, co-operatives begin to deal with realities in different ways according to their needs to consolidate economic relationships with partners, as well as with suppliers and clients. These external subjects go through a process of comprehending what is the mission of community co-operatives, as they see how they function in practice. In this sense, the relationships with the private sector are mainly for commercial exchange of collaboration in developing new products and services (e.g. Brigi implementing its tourist offer with local restaurants and producers). With the third sector, the collaborations are more devoted to enhance the community benefits (e.g. Ri-maflow hosting other groups and Valle dei cavalieri helping elder residents). The growth phase sees these co-operatives gain a marginal position in their community, given their limited economic capacity in terms of investment. Nevertheless, they begin to be known, and have interactions with local residents and/or clients. In this phase, a key factor in the development of co-operatives' reputation is the relationships, both formal and informal, which co-operators and co-operatives can create and enhance.

This is a small village, social relationships among acquaintances are the main tool to understand what to do. (Interview 15, Valle dei Cavalieri)

We all live in the same neighbourhood, us, the local business owners and who works in social services. (Interview 10, La Paranza)

During this phase, Brigi has established many collaborations that have made it part of the regional and national networks for mountain trekking; it has also established relationships with local businesses, such as restaurants, for integrating its local tourist offer. La Paranza has worked in two directions: one towards businesses, where tourists can find local products and have meals during their stay in Naples and another towards other third-sector organizations that work in local welfare (this network is explained later). Post-modernissimo has kept a strong connection with its first supporters, who participated in the crowdfunding for re-opening the cinema theatre; every year, they participate in a general meeting and give suggestions and advice for choosing the programme. In addition, a wide network with local cultural associations and

charities brings inputs to the co-operative for promoting new social and political themes for free-entry initiatives. Due to its political nature, Ri-maflow has developed a huge network among the far-left movement in Milan, and shares support with many other initiatives that have the same objectives and ideas; these include local organic farms, other worker activist groups, and antifascist organizations.

This phase is a crucial point in the evolution of the community development process and the co-operative's life cycle because it determines the firm's capacity to sustain its activities through an efficient business plan and to establish key connections for its socio-economic commitment towards the community.

Maturity

As Table 2 explains, only three cases have already reached the stage of maturity (La Paranza, Melpignano, and Valle dei cavalieri). They are now well-consolidated businesses in their communities, and their work and efforts are clearly recognized by local residents, public authorities and other organizations. Their internal mechanisms are defined, and a routine is established, which allows these firms to carry out their activities without deep and considerable recalibrations. Moreover, the volume of income enables greater investment in elaborating new solutions for the community. These businesses have a stable and solid position in their market areas: for instance, La Paranza is a key operator in the tourism market in Naples, selling around 130,000 tickets every year.⁵ Melpignano has a consolidated grid for solar energy production (33 plants with a production capacity of 179.67 kW, involving 70 families), more than 50 water-distribution points around the province of Lecce, and the management of the local park.⁶ Valle dei Cavalieri has saved its village, thereby ensuring a continued habitation which has pushed many house owners to renovate their properties and use them during holidays or for renting. Furthermore, it has involved local farmers in a community project for creating a dairy workshop; this has reactivated an old tradition of cheese production, and has developed a wide network with other tourist operators for offering integrated holidays packs.⁷

If someone [in the local population] had doubts about our projects, now they are all convinced about the key role we have in the community development. (Interview 14, Melpignano)

At the beginning, old residents told us we were foolish to think about a co-operative; nowadays, many owners have renewed their houses and if they want to sell they find immediately someone who wants to buy because the village is alive again. (Interview n°15, Valle dei Cavalieri)

⁵ www.catacombedinapoli.it.

⁶ www.coopcomunitamelpignano.it.

⁷ www.valledeicavalieri.it.

The role and impact of these co-operatives are no longer questioned by some sections of their communities because their functioning has proved their positive effects in the locality. A key factor for the approval of their work is the networks with local partners and other community members, which were created over the years and consolidated through efficient services and benefit-sharing.

Local networks

As explained in the theoretical part, this analysis focuses its attention not on the model functioning but on the co-operatives' processes and relationships. This section examines co-operatives partners' main features and assesses their contribution to the projects. All cases present a network with various links to local organizations, both public and private; however, the differences between one network and another can illustrate how the same model of the community co-operative can function differently according to the context.

Table 3 catalogues results for the types of partners that community co-operatives have relations with; it can be seen that these collective firms develop a wide range of connections with other subjects, to accomplish their mission to be a community enterprise. Certain co-operatives can also witness frictions with certain parts of their local community, due to having divergent visions; these frictions can range from personal distrust between local residents and co-operators, as reported in many interviews (AnversiAmo, Brigí, Melpignano, Ri-maflow), to conflictual relations between organizations.

I do not know why but my feeling is that there are certain local dynamics that keep many people away from this project because it enters into determined local relations and frictions. (Interview 9, AnversiAmo)

In the extreme case, an open conflict with local authorities can cause many problems to the co-operative. In particular, Ri-maflow is the result of a long political process that began in 2012, in response to a factory shutdown. Workers had occupied the plant and claimed the property as compensation for their unemployment status. The local town hall has never supported the activists' fight, and it has always tried to stop this initiative.

The town hall is against us. (Interview 4, Ri-Maflow)

Table 3. Co-operatives' partners.

Type of partner	No. of co-operatives
Other private business	7 out of 7
Other third-sector organizations	6 out of 7
Local public authorities	5 out of 7
Religious entities	3 out of 7
Political parties or organizations	1 out of 7

Co-operators, particularly those whose organizations have reached the maturity phase, explain that perplexities and doubt about co-operatives' effective benefits for communities can be overcome through constant work, and after years of demonstrating their intentions. Partners' advocacy and the support of co-operators' acquaintances function to ameliorate these frictions and distrust.

Discussion

Italian co-operatives, international characteristics

In relation to the first research question, collected data present main common elements with international experiences of community co-operatives and also certain peculiarities of the Italian context. It clearly appears how community development is the mission for these collective firms, indeed, their self-declaration as 'community enterprise' is an evident proof of their solidarity intentions toward communities. This poses the Italian initiatives within the sector of 'community economic development' (Wilkinson & Quarter, 1996; Brown, 1997; Somerville & McElwee, 2011). Their most common process to foster the community development pass through the regeneration and/or management of local assets giving a new socio-economic role to them (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Bailey, 2012). As in other countries, Italian community co-operatives do not operate in a specific sector but they accomplish their mission by creating diverse business activities, mostly in tourism, commerce, cultural activities, and energy production or managing commons (Wilkinson & Quarter, 1996; Firth et al., 2009; Somerville & McElwee, 2011; Giovannini, 2015; Tarhan, 2015). As well as, they prove to be fundamental tool to manage basic services and generate resources in marginal rural areas or in contexts with scarce opportunities (Fulton & Ketilson, 1992; Zeuli and Radel 2004; Calderwood & Davies, 2006; Majee & Hoyt, 2011).

Considering the specificities of the Italian context, it is important to highlight the fundamental role of the 'governance of commons' at the base of the entire movement. The famous theory elaborated by Elinor Ostrom (2012) states the necessity to create a co-operative governance among local citizens to ensure the preservation and adequate management of local commons. Albeit these organizations are clearly not considerable as commons, the examination of the community co-operative movement underlines how these theory has had a huge impact on the civic consciousness of many groups which have then created a community co-operative (Arena & Iaione, 2015; Borzaga and Zandonai, 2015). Italian co-operators interpret their work as the realization of a co-operative governance to enhance the community well-being and manage local resources considering these as 'commons'. This is mostly in line with the idea of an asset-based community development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Another characteristic element of Italian community co-operative

is the strong value posed in the 'sense of community' mostly based on a cultural sense of belonging to territories. Italian communities have a strong sense of attachment to their territory; co-operators translate this bonding into their firms' mission. This partially appears in the international literature, which mainly justifies the co-operative's mission to create a benefit for the community; in the Italian cases, the primary reason for the community commitment is the co-operators' cultural heritage embedded into their communities.

A further discrepancy that emerges from the literature is the recent appearance of these co-operatives in Italy. Considering the long history of the Italian co-operative movement and the precedent realization of community co-operatives in countries with marginal experiences of co-operation, it is necessary to understand the delay in the Italian context. The reason can be the disappearance of other forms of agency in the territories to generate public participation and social change. Since mid-twentieth century, political parties, association, and social movements have had a huge role in fostering participation in social structure able to canalize social demands and forces into the organized structure and to develop aggregation and civic activism for the common good (Putnam et al., 1993). Since the 1990s, a structural crisis of national organizations, both social and political, has compromised citizens' trust in participation into national entities (Bordignon et al., 2018). These organizations have functioned as intermediate entities between citizens and institution to aggregate forces and uphold their claims (Putnam et al., 1993); their weakening has left people without a form of aggregation for their local interest. Alongside, the 2008 economic crisis and the consequent harsh public spending review have dramatically decreased resources for local public authorities and these have forced them to look for new models to manage their assets and generate resources (Fazzi 2013; Gallucio et al., 2018). Indeed, many co-operators consider the community co-operative as the only way to regenerate their communities because there are no more other solutions but only the active non-political citizenship Bianchi (2021). For these reasons, only in the last 10 years, Italy has witnessed the emergence of community co-operatives as agents for local socio-economic development.

Community co-operatives as structuration of relationship for community development outcomes

The main consideration is related to the agency of participant's action in the evolution of the co-operative firm structure; as findings show, local citizens have found a practical solution to their problems adapting an existing organizational structure to their local issues. The seven case studies explain how the interactions of subjects in different places at diverse moments can have similar results; there are a series of factors that explain the appearance of community co-operatives. Each subject has the intention to modify the socio-economic

context through direct action because acknowledges the conditions of disadvantage. In front of the limit of their resources, subjects decide to collaborate for a common goal and set common rules that can help to structure organizations to maximize the benefit from common resources. This is the value of mutuality that has the intrinsic force of the co-operative firms and here evolves from an internal sharing to an external sharing (Bianchi, 2019).

Looking at these results through the theoretical framework of structuration theory, it is possible to see how the subjects interact with each other and structure their ideas of collaboration into an organization that is able to generate resources – which can further enable the action of change – to improve the local socio-economic conditions (Lamsal, 2012).

Enlarging the perspective to the whole process behind the formation of community co-operatives, it is possible to examine more elements and factors in their structuration. The entrepreneurial idea is built around the concept of 'community development' using local resources and expanding networks within the local population. In all the cases, networks help the co-operative to connect with the local territory, which can be conceptualized not only as merely geographic space but also as set of diverse actors and resources (Goldenberg and Haines, 1992). These elements have interactions among themselves, and these interconnections generate the local context. Community co-operatives enter into these contexts as a result of certain local members' efforts for their communities. Consequently, it is possible to sustain how the constant social practice of this commitment has led to structure both the co-operative – as entrepreneurial structure to generate resources and organize activities – and the networks around them – as supportive connections for these organizations. As Giddens (1984) explains agents are simultaneously influenced by the structure and shape it; in this sense, findings show how subjects involved in the co-operative projects reproduce dynamics of collaboration learned in other contexts of the third sector to generate a new model for local development and invert the trend of the disadvantage of their territories. As interviewees explain, partners in their networks are fundamental because they can propose projects for co-operatives' new services, provide information on the local market, or bring new clients – and, most importantly, provide diverse perspectives on the community – particularly those partners that are as well third-sector organizations. Social relationships of diverse types can be useful both in urban and rural contexts. Therefore, this creates a local system for the community that tides the agents to this commitment towards the general interest. These networks of connections generate also moral norms of collaboration and reciprocity from and to the co-operatives because they express the willing of local subjects to make a change in the local system (Steiner et al., 2021).

They aim to improve socio-economic conditions for either their private interests, as reflected in the business nature of co-operatives, or for the social

advantage of targeted beneficiaries, as per the community mission set by the founders. This mission for the community interest leads the process of formation of these co-operatives; around these missions, agents constitute the co-operatives and the networks within which resources are shared and rules determined to govern these grass-roots initiatives for community development. This combination of rules and resources is what defines the local system around the objective of the community development (Whittington, 2010). They look for collaborations with private businesses in order to enhance local socio-economic conditions for their micro-economies; this approach is particularly noticeable in community development practices that theorize local actions as a way to obtain better conditions, by attracting both new resources and clients into the community (Kretzmann & McNight, 1993; Henderson & Vercseg, 2010; Craig et al., 2011). Positioning the co-operatives at the core of these local networks, local social agents formulate dynamics of modification of the local systems structures, such as the economic deprivation or the environmental conservation.

Generally, this diverse perspective shows how community co-operatives are the result of intentions from a determined group of agents with precedent social relationships and background in the third sector. Through the various steps examined above, it is possible to notice an evolution from the bonding to bridging forms of social capital; social relationships can activate positive effects for those involved in them; they can enhance trust, collaboration and reciprocity among participants (Putnam, 2000; Borzaga and Sforzi, 2015). Therefore, the evolution of local social interactions among these social agents has structured the co-operatives in order to generate a change in the context where agents act.

However, it must be noted that each co-operative adds partners according to its specific objectives and business area. Although the capacity for networking is recognizable in each organization, these interconnections vary from case to case, and they do not necessarily involve all the categories of partners. Furthermore, networks and partners are different in urban and rural contexts. In smaller contexts (AnversìAmo, Brigì, Melpignano, Valle dei Cavalieri), personal relationships have a greater importance, as they facilitate information circulation and direct feedback about the co-operatives, through talking and face-to-face dialogue. All co-operators in these settings agree on the relevance of these informal interactions, as a main way of spreading the co-operative into the community and collecting inputs for their work. On the contrary, urban contexts require more structured forms of networks, and more mechanisms of interrelations between organizations, for assessing communities' opinions, issues and resources. These co-operatives have less direct contact with people; nevertheless, they achieve a wide network through connections with other entities that act as links between the co-operatives and their audiences. Particularly, Post-modernissimo and La Paranza benefit from other local forms of

community development. Post-modernissimo is part of a more extended local civic movement that has been active for years in the neighbourhood, aiming to foster social regeneration through cultural activities after years of dereliction. La Paranza has taken a further step in its social initiatives for the neighbourhood, as it is one of the founders of St Gennaro Community Foundation. This organization sustains projects for education, sport, business start-ups, culture, urban regeneration and social assistance; this involves a new network of both third-sector organizations and private businesses. Ri-maflo has developed a huge network of relations in the Milan area with other political organizations in the left wing and alternative economy area, but this does not present a similar level of structuration. Despite their diversities, these networks demonstrate how community co-operatives in urban contexts need external structures for carrying out their activities and comprehending their communities, due to the more complex social settings in which they operate. Therefore, it is evident how the structuration of community co-operatives mostly relies on the support of other third-sector organizations particularly because they share common values and goals such as the community development.

Conclusions

This analysis aims to present a more diverse interpretation than those of the previous scientific literature on Italian community co-operatives.

First, these cases demonstrate how founders and co-operators are the key agencies in developing their specific processes and networks. From small groups with pre-existing social relationships and strong background in the third sector, projects for community co-operatives attract other local stakeholders who become partners. These incorporations happen on the basis of personal relationships between co-operators and other community members and then, for entrepreneurial reasons which lead co-operatives to attract other organizations. These networks are useful for various reasons: they help to share the founding idea, gather further resources for the start-up phase, and connect co-operatives to other key entities that can enhance the understanding of local businesses and communities. In any case, one can observe the evolution from a small circle to a wider network of relationships.

Secondly, the process perspective favours a diverse vision of these co-operatives; they are not unified entities, but a group of particular agents from the community, with specific social characteristics and views on local issues. These lead the group to deal with certain subjects rather than others, and influence the way co-operators interpret their work. Generally, we can consider community co-operatives as the outcome of long processes of negotiation and discussion between founders and communities. In a certain sense, co-operatives are outcomes of processes of interactions between the agents and the local social structure to generate a change into it.

In conclusion, it is possible to sustain that community co-operatives are collective enterprises with a social mission, committed to the community's well-being. A few members initially promote these initiatives, but they enlarge the co-operatives' perspective on local contexts through a network of collaboration; this functions in different ways according to the contextual situation, shared values and co-operators' choice. Main limit for this research is the reduced sample; national confederations of co-operative estimated a population of around 100 community co-operatives in Italy; therefore, this research has engaged a few numbers for the investigation. Moreover, results draw on the basis of managers' point of views which can be limited and partial compared to the whole co-operatives' history. Future analysis can engage other actors involved in the community development processes and understand reasons for the local population's discredit alongside the co-operatives formation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Data.World at <https://data.world/michele-bianchi/italian-community-co-operatives> before you use this data please consult the author.

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