

The Local Food Processing House: a social innovation for rural development (a case study in Campania)

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Abstract

Social innovation assigns importance to the social and relational aspect of the community development linking it to social interactions and cooperation. Collective actions are crucial not only to promote new solutions to the problems generated by the globalization and the financial crisis in rural areas, but also in supporting community resilience. This study focuses on an experience of social innovation in a southern Italian community, Caggiano, who has built around food a new path of development. The work analyses the mechanisms displayed and employed by the community to achieve cohesiveness and trust among different local actors and highlight how the social innovation implemented played a crucial role in promoting the development and the sustainability of the community.

Key words: social innovation; resilience; food processing; rural development

Abstract

L'innovazione sociale attribuisce importanza alla dimensione sociale dello sviluppo di una comunità legandolo alle interazioni sociali e alla collaborazione. Le azioni collettive si rivelano decisive non solo nel

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promuovere nuove risposte ai problemi generati dalla globalizzazione e dalla crisi finanziaria nelle aree rurali, ma anche nell'accrescere la resilienza della comunità. Lo studio si focalizza su un'esperienza di innovazione sociale in una comunità del Sud Italia, Caggiano, che ha costruito intorno al cibo un nuovo percorso di sviluppo. Il lavoro analizza i meccanismi utilizzati dalla comunità per raggiungere la coesione tra i diversi attori locali ed evidenzia come l'innovazione sociale realizzata si sia rivelata determinante nel promuovere lo sviluppo sostenibile della comunità.

Parole chiave: innovazione sociale; resilienza; trasformazione dei prodotti alimentari; sviluppo rurale

1. Introduction

The social dynamics produced by the process of globalisation, the financial crisis of 2008, and the austerity measures introduced following the crisis, have exacerbated the problem of poverty and social exclusion and pose a serious risk to the survival of rural communities (Bock, 2016; Blanco & Cruz, 2014, Andreopoulou *et al.*, 2012). The most evident effects have been population decline, increased unemployment and a reduction in income. These effects are interrelated and tend to create a vicious cycle that feeds a process of geographical and also social marginalisation in rural areas. As a result, marginalisation is not exclusive to areas that are geographically peripheral but can also affect central regions, where social and economic connections have been weakened or destroyed (Bock, 2016). Furthermore, the social consequences of the financial crisis vary according to the individual contexts of communities and tend to hit the most disadvantaged hardest, which increases inequalities (Blanco & Cruz, 2014). Adding to these challenges are the effects of climate change, the growth of population in some areas of the globe, and migration (Wilson, 2014).

In the face of such complex challenges, many scholars and policy makers insist on the need for innovative solutions that are able to respond systemically to the consequences of the financial crisis and counteract its negative effects. In particular, much importance is given

to implementing innovations that allow the system of a community to learn, adapt and, in some cases, transform itself (Westley, 2013). Social innovations fulfil this objective as, unlike technological innovations, they do not aim at simply resolving individual problems but seek to change the underlying social dynamics that cause them. Social innovation therefore represents an interesting research approach in that it assigns greater importance to the social and relational aspects of community development, which is achieved through social interactions and collaboration (Bock, 2016). Collective actions also prove decisive not only in promoting new responses to the problems caused by the financial crisis but also in supporting the projects that prove advantageous for the local community and increase its resilience (Grybovych & Hafermann, 2010).

This study is based on an experience of social innovation in a community in South Italy, Caggiano, which has constructed a new path for development around food.

In this context, the study aims to verify if and how social innovation plays a critical role in fostering a community's development and environmental sustainability. The paper intends to contribute to existing research on innovations produced by alternative local food networks by examining the principal drivers of innovation identified in the research community and sharing the lessons learnt from the case study initiatives.

2. Social innovation: a literature review

The concept of social innovation is gaining prominence in the academic debate and the political agenda. In Europe, social innovation was introduced as the most appropriate strategy to address many of today's most pressing challenges, ranging from problems related to the process of globalisation to the effects of the financial crisis.

In the literature, social innovation is generally presented as social innovations that aim to respond to social needs which are not currently met by neither the market nor the state (Blanco & Cruz, 2014; Bock, 2016; Neumeier, 2016). Social innovation is therefore social both in its objective, as it intends to satisfy collective needs, and in its

means, as it is based on cooperative actions led by citizens (Blanco & Cruz, 2014; Bosworth *et al.*, 2016; Murray *et al.*, 2010).

Many studies insist on the importance of social innovation as an effective instrument for social change that can activate new skills in the community, such as increase citizens' capacity to respond to changes creatively, and promote the sustainability and resilience of the community, which is especially important for communities located in marginal rural areas (Bock, 2016; Blanco & Cruz, 2014).

Seyfang and Smith (2007) introduce the term "grass roots initiative" to refer to the social initiatives carried out by individuals and organisations which aim to develop innovative bottom-up solutions. Bottom-up solutions differ from top-down solutions because they involve the whole community in experimenting with social innovations and in developing new niche-based approaches (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Kirwan *et al.* (2013) adopt the concept of grassroots social innovations, in the form of niche innovation, as a framework of reference to show the extent to which local food networks are able to strengthen the community's ability to respond to the problems they face at a local level, and to produce wide-spread and sustainable change. In particular, the study reflects on the difference between technical innovation and social innovation. Whilst the former is achieved through introducing material technologies, and produce tangible results, the latter manifests itself in social practices, and therefore brings about a change in social behaviours, which translate into new practices that benefit the community (Kirwan *et al.*, 2013). According to Quilley (2011), social initiatives undertaken by individuals in a community are able to invert the process of globalisation, albeit not definitively, and promote the development of new skills that can help the community resist and counteract external pressures, especially problems relating to the scarcity of environmental resources and climate change. Innovations connected to local food production prove to be particularly effective in increasing community resilience because they both promote a sustainable development model and build trust in the community which, in turn, improves the community's ability to cope with challenges autonomously and significantly change their own local food culture (Quilley, 2011). Maye (2016) highlights how social innovations, in particular "second order" social innovations, represent a key element

in the process of transition of current socio-technical regimes, from a system based on obsolete rules to a more sustainable and resilient model. In comparison to “first order” innovations, which respond only to the contradictions within the system, “second order” innovations also react to external pressures and aim to transform the system itself without, however, changing its identity (Maye, 2016). In this sense, social innovations promote the resilience of a community, where resilience is generally understood as «the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity» (Wilson, 2014, p.1).

Resilience and innovation are effectively two sides of the same coin and the strengthening of one promotes the development of the other (Westley, 2013). If social innovations increase the resilience of a community, a more resilient community will be better able to develop increasingly more effective and innovative solutions. Magis (2010) argues, for example, how members of a resilient community can not only respond to changes but also create new opportunities and common paths of development.

However, according to Bock (2016), communities are not able to face the problems arising from the financial crisis alone, they need the support of public institutions and the help of extra-local facilitators. In particular, Bock (2016) reflects on the need to promote collaboration at a regional level to allow communities to access exogenous resources that «allow for vitalisation if matched with endogenous forces» (Bock, 2016, p. 19). Neumeier (2016) also stresses the importance of creating new synergies between communities, organisations and public institutions, whilst still recognising that governing bodies and external actors can facilitate the development of social initiatives but not intentionally start or drive them, only communities have the ability and the resources to do so.

3. Case study

The initiative under study involved the community of Caggiano, a small municipality in the Campania region which falls within the territory of the Local Action Group (LAG) “Pathways to Good Living”

(“*I Sentieri del Buon Vivere*”), a consortium made up of public and private actors, under the Rural Development Plan of the Campania Region 2007-2013. The municipality has a population of just 2,780 inhabitants (Istat, 2016) and presents many of the features that characterise inland rural areas: a poorly diversified economy; a production structure based principally on agriculture; poor connection with larger centres; insufficient infrastructure; population decline and a high rate of unemployment and population ageing (Salvia and Quaranta, 2016, forthcoming; Bock, 2016).

Despite its many challenges, the municipality of Caggiano shows strong signs of vitality and has carried out numerous initiatives that have food as their principal focus but have broader objectives, such as supporting small local farms, fostering collaboration between local stakeholders, promoting greater social inclusion and spreading a culture of “healthy and traditional eating”.

The “Local Food Processing House” initiative, set up in the municipality of Caggiano is, in fact, the latest in a series of initiatives started within the community which are centred around the valorisation of local agri-food products. The Local Food Processing House is a food processing laboratory which has been granted to the Caggiano Town Council on a five-year free lease by the LAG under the project “The Good Living Kitchen” (“*Mense del Buon Vivere*”). The unit is open to both local residents and residents from outside the community and uses the latest food processing technology to package/process any type of foodstuffs from fruit and vegetables to meat. The Caggiano Town Council also provides technical support in the form of on-site trained technicians to help local farmers learn to use the machinery. The new technology was introduced with the aim to significantly reduce food waste by giving farmers more options to preserve their produce, thereby starting a virtuous cycle of ecological and socio-economic sustainability. The introduction of the technology also acted as a powerful catalyst to set up a local food network led by different local actors, such as families, farms, schools, restaurants etc. The new technology has meant much more than access to modern

¹ The project “The Good Living Kitchen”, promoted by the LAG “Pathways to Good Living”, aims to create new synergies between local actors in order to promote the development of new skills and know how so that the community can better exploit its internal resources.

processing technologies, it has sparked a process of greater collaboration and knowledge exchange between different local actors, which has resulted in many more initiatives that have transformed this small township into a sort of territorial laboratory of ideas.

The table below shows the main initiatives promoted by the community in recent years:

Tab. 1 – Initiatives promoted by Caggiano community

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Parties involved</i>	<i>Main aims</i>
0 km School Meals	The families of students provide local products (potatoes, chickpeas, beans, extra virgin olive oil, tinned tomatoes) for the local school canteen (as an alternative to the traditional school meals payment model)	Council, farmers, families, consumers, Local Health Authority (ASL)	Promote sharing and diffusion of local products; promote the use of certified local processing plants; promote the use of genuine, fresh foods in the school canteen
Caggianese Bread	Provides bread for the school canteen made using flour produced locally using traditional methods The flour produced is also distributed to local bakers who prepare bread using traditional methods and recipes	Town Council, farmers, ASL (Local Health Authority), consumers, bakeries	Promote the use of local high quality products; promote the conservation of local traditions; help the sustainability of local crops; strengthen ties between producers and consumers
Local shop	Opening of a new local shop which aims to integrate residents with disabilities by giving them employment	Town Council, farmers, families, consumers	Promote social integration of residents with disabilities; strengthen the local economy through the sale of local products
High quality restaurants	The setting up of several new business initiatives in the gastronomical sector	Restaurant owners, farmers, consumers	Increase awareness and appreciation of local gastronomic traditions; promote the consumption of local products; strengthen the local economy by setting up new businesses
Food Festivals	The planning of four annual local food festivals	Council, community, farmers,	Raise the profile of local products and traditions;

		consumers, Local Health Authority (ASL)	strengthen ties between local producers; encourage consumers to meet local producers; promote rural tourism
Public Winery	The opening of a public winery and running of a local vineyard located in the town's historical centre	Council, farmers, Local Health Authority (ASL)	Promote the conservation of the biodiversity of local grapevines; promote the conservation of the traditional landscape

Source: adapted after Salvia and Quaranta, 2016, forthcoming

4. Implications of the case study's findings

The experience of the Local Food Processing House, and more generally all the initiatives promoted within the municipality of Caggiano aimed at valorising local agro-food products, are proof of how social initiatives led by the community can become true social innovations. It is now widely accepted that social innovation can emerge in many ways. According to Neumeier (2012), for example, innovation develops as a «co-evolutionary learning processes occurring in hybrid networks of human and non-human actors» (Neumeier 2012, p. 65). This means that the relationships between different actors and the development of new ideas are factors to be considered equally important as the implementation of new technologies (Bosworth *et al.*, 2016).

The case study therefore confirms the importance of social relationships and collective actions in processes of local development. The cooperation initiatives have fostered an exchange of knowledge and resources between the different local stakeholders and provided a new space for discussion that came to represent a real laboratory of ideas where a new model of development could be constructed. This new model was not led by top-down policies but instead delegated responsibility to individual local actors. This type of “bottom-up” approach proved to be more successful than the “top-down” approach at including the local community, who in turn became both the promoters and beneficiaries of the development initiative.

In regards to the benefits of social innovations, many studies argue that they create intangible benefits rather than material outputs (Kirwan *et al.*, 2013; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). The case study supports this argument since the innovations promoted in the project were principally intended to change behaviours and help local stakeholders develop new skills.

The nature of capacity building in the projects implemented can be better understood by implementing the framework developed by Kirwan *et al.* (2013), which identifies five aspects of social innovation. The first regards the development of “material capacity” and therefore looks at the tangible benefits produced by projects. The tangible benefits to come out of the initiatives are the production of new food products (Caggianese bread); the creation of new business initiatives in the gastronomic sector (local shop; high quality restaurants; public winery); the promotion of food festivals; job creation (local shop). The second aspect regards the development of “personal capacity”, and includes changes to life-style and acquisition of new skills. In this case, the innovations have promoted; a substantial change in eating habits for the people involved in the project (0km School Meals); the development of entrepreneurship; a greater social inclusion, especially of disadvantaged groups and people with disabilities (local shop); a greater awareness of the local community and its resources and higher levels of trust and confidence. The third aspect regards “cultural capacity” and involves improving administrative skills and access to the resources unlocked via projects. From this standpoint, the initiatives proved particularly effective in improving the availability of local resources (food processing machinery and local products). The fourth aspect relates to “asset building” at an individual and community level (Adams and Hess, 2008) and entails strengthening the organisational capacity of the community and promoting cooperation between its different stakeholders. In the case study the creation of a meeting point between different producers in the territory proved particularly successful in that it encouraged a greater sharing of resources and paved the way for new business initiatives. The fifth, and final, aspect of social innovation regards “the community as a social agent” and insists on the importance of community participation in the process of local development. The case study projects also

satisfy this demand as their development involved the whole local community.

5. Concluding remarks

In a complex and dynamic world innovation has become an imperative. Firms need to be innovative to stay afloat in an increasingly competitive economy and communities must explore and implement innovative solutions if they are to survive modern financial pressures and address the social needs that have hitherto been neglected by both the market and the state.

In this scenario, social innovations represent an important resource for development, especially for marginal rural areas, i.e. those areas that are more affected by the after-effects of the financial crisis because of structural problems, such as a lack of internal resources and poor access to major networks.

The study describes an example of social innovation implemented in a small rural township in southern Italy that built a new path to development around food products. The project involved numerous initiatives that can be considered typical examples of social innovation. All the initiatives, in fact, were examples of cooperative actions led by citizens, in this case mainly linked to food, which were realised entirely independently from the market and governing bodies (Blanco & Cruz, 2014). In light of this, the innovations can be interpreted as new spaces of political resistance (Bock, 2016), in which citizens negotiated new solutions and used an alternative approach to development management that is not based on top-down governance but assigns the community sole responsibility for leading the entire process of development. The initiatives also became effective instruments of innovation that brought about a real and substantial change in participants' behaviours and community relationships. In this sense, the technological innovation (the Local Food Processing House) was used as a vehicle to foster wider social changes, such as a greater community cohesion and social inclusion, and a deeper focus on guaranteeing that development pathways prove socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

In conclusion, social innovations can be considered as new mechanisms of resilience that help communities to respond to current social and economic challenges with creative solutions. However, much research is still needed, especially into how best to encourage the implementation of social innovations and foster the development of wider-reaching connections at a regional level so that communities can gain access to greater resources (Bock, 2016).

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