

Food procurement and short food value chains

AN ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDIES
IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE REALMS

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5. The role of social innovation and biodiversity preservation in public and private food procurement in urban areas

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses the case studies identified by the Università degli Studi di Bari within the area of expertise *biodiversity preservation and innovation acceptability*, with the aim to outline the role of social innovation and biodiversity preservation in public and private food procurement in urban areas. In the first part, the analysis of the case studies Semi di Vita and Avanzi Popolo 2.0 focuses on on the main activities/actions inside different social agriculture projects that create training and job opportunities to disadvantaged people, and initiatives for the redistribution of unsold food and reduction of food waste. The second part analyses the case studies Biosolequo Coop AR.L., Azienda Agricola Pasquale Ferrara and Azienda ortofrutticola Egnathia, highlighting the main activities/actions carried out to enhance preservation of biodiversity and diffusion of local/typical products. The third part analyses the case study Altereco in order to outline the role of social cooperatives implementing a legal model for agrifood production from innovative and alter-

native supply chains, through the the management of assets confiscated to the mafia. Finally, main conclusions and research perspectives are presented.

5.1 Models of social innovation favouring public and private food procurement in urban areas

In recent years, social innovation has gained increased attention by the food systems actors, because it is a mobilisation-participation process that leads to actions improving social relations and food security (Milley *et al.*, 2020; Cattivelli, 2022). Bouchard *et al.* (2015, pp. 12-13), defined social innovation as

[...] an intervention initiated by social actors to fulfil an aspiration or need, provide a solution or seize an opportunity for action in order to modify social relations, transform a framework for action or propose new cultural orientations. From this perspective [...], social innovation aims to modify the institutional frameworks that shape relationships in society.

In urban food systems, private and public food procurement can determine the way food is produced, transported and marketed, and can shift food consumption patterns towards sustainable and healthy diets (Swensson & Tartanac, 2020; Gaitán-Cremaschi *et al.*, 2022; Parsons & Barling, 2022). Depending on the social innovations adopted, changes in food systems driven by public and private food procurement may contribute to achieve sustainability goals and food and nutrition security objectives (Morley, 2021; Vasile, 2022).

Social innovations in urban food systems mainly focus on the self-organization of local actors promoting bottom-up approaches to overcome the lack of food procurement or to improve existing public services (De Schutter, 2015; Cattivelli & Rusciano, 2020; Swensson *et al.*, 2021). There are two main types of social innovations emerged from recent scientific literature:

1. social agriculture projects that create training and job opportunities to disadvantaged people;
2. initiatives for the redistribution of unsold food and reduction of food waste (Genova *et al.*, 2020; Lombardi & Costantino, 2020; Musolino *et al.*, 2020; Elsen & Fazzi, 2021; Zhao *et al.*, 2023; da Silva *et al.*, 2024).

Hereafter we explored two case studies in Apulia region (Southern Italy) that implemented these two types of social innovations. The first case study is *Semi di Vita*, a cooperative operating since 2011 in some municipalities in the province of Bari. It is one of the first examples of social agriculture in Apulia region, involving disadvantaged people in projects for enhancing the quality and biodiversity of local agricultural products. Particularly, in 2011 Semi di Vita created a urban social garden of 2.000 m² in the municipality of Casamassima, managed by producers who involved children with disabilities; a further garden of about 2 hectares was set up in 2014 in the Japigia suburb of Bari. In 2019, the cooperative started a project of social agriculture and urban regeneration named Fattoria dei primi in the municipality of Valenzano, to offer training and job opportunities for young people with disabilities or troubles with the law. In this project, about 26 hectares of land confiscated to the mafia were recovered and cultivated under organic agriculture.

At the end of 2021, the cooperative started the project *La Cardoncelleria Fornelli* thanks to a fund from the Italian Ministry of Justice, to involve young people hosted in the juvenile criminal institute

Figure 1.
Organic dried cherry tomatoes produced by Semi di Vita and sold in its e-shop.





Figure 2.
Social pantry
in an elementary
school in Bari.

Nicola Fornelli of Bari. Here a greenhouse and a packaging laboratory were created; the greenhouse is used in autumn and winter for cultivating the local mushroom *cardoncello*, while during spring and summer the greenhouse is used to dry organic vegetable products (tomatoes, chili, spices, etc.) (Figure 1).

The second case study is *Avanzi Popolo 2.0*, a social innovation dealing with the redistribution of unsold food and reduction of food waste. It was developed by the no-profit association Farina 080 in Bari, for promoting actions to contrast food waste through the connection between sites of waste generation and food consumption (e.g. household, food retailers and restaurants). *Avanzi Popolo 2.0* is an evolution of an experimental activity started in 2014 based on fair trade and solidarity. The association collaborates with various donors and local organizations that carry out food withdrawal and redistribution, since they are close to sites where food surplus takes place. Moreover, within the processes of reduction of food surpluses and waste prevention, *Avanzi Popolo 2.0* creates relationships with local producers, food networks and groups of solidarity purchase. Over the years, about 900 actions have been developed with more than 45.000 kg of food surpluses recovered from agri-food businesses, restaurants, agricultural cooperatives and donated to about 80 associations and organizations involved in contrasting poverty. In addition, for the first time in Apulia region, a web platform was tested for sharing food surpluses and food close to expiry, building an inclusive and sustaina-

ble community fighting poverty and contrasting food waste. A further social innovation was the *Friigo Solidale*, which contributed to combat food poverty through the installation of seven solidarity refrigerators and pantries in the city of Bari and its province. Finally, the association carried out the *School Sharing* project in three elementary and secondary schools in Bari, where playful teaching and laboratories were tested to increase the awareness of students about food waste generation, prevention and reduction. This project enabled to implement a social pantry for students, teachers and school staff to share food at risk of waste (Figure 2); students were invited to establish the rules of use of the school pantry starting from the observation of their own home pantry, thus experiencing food sharing practically.

5.2 Local food products and biodiversity preservation as a lever for public and private food procurement in urban areas

Sustainable agriculture and the valorisation of local resources serve to foster fair economic development that prioritizes both environmental preservation and community well-being. This principle is exemplified by three notable cases: Bio Solequo Coop, Ortofrutticola Egnathia and Azienda Agricola Pasquale Ferrara. They demonstrate how primary production can integrate social, environmental and economic sustainability to create effective and successful models.

Bio Solequo Coop is an agricultural cooperative located in the municipality of Ostuni (province of Brindisi) (Gonnella *et al.*, 2015). It fosters fair trade practices and promotes the rich culinary heritage of Apulia region through the cultivation of organic, locally-sourced vegetables. The cooperative primarily operates within the peri-urban vegetable gardens (Figure 3), covering about three hectares.

These gardens have a significant historical background, tracing back to medieval times and built upon the remnants of an ancient Messapic village dating back to the 5th-6th centuries BC. The area, which features terraced distribution and ancient wells known as Aquariums capable of holding up to 500.000 litres of water, was



Figure 3.
Overview of peri-urban vegetable gardens of Bio Solequo Coop placed in Ostuni.

levelled in ancient times to optimize agricultural use. In recent years, Bio Solequo carried out extensive restoration both in terms of architectural-landscape preservation and soil productivity. The area, once abandoned and overgrown with wild vegetation in the 1970s, was revitalized through the enrichment of soil with organic matter and the adoption of green manure techniques. Since its birth, the cooperative preserves and valorizes local varieties of Apulian vegetables. Since December 2016, Bio Solequo collaborates with the Soil, Plant, and Food Sciences Department (Di.S.S.P.A.) of the Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro, particularly through its involvement in the *BiodiverSO* project (*Biodiversity of Horticultural Species of Apulia*).

Initially serving as a custodian of local varieties, the cooperative became a partner also in the *BiodiverSO* Karpos project (*Biodiversity of Apulian Horticultural Fruit Species*) from 2022 onwards. This project focuses on the recovery, characterization and promotion of native plant genetic resources, assessing their productivity, response to traditional cultivation methods, and production costs for subsequent reintroduction into the local agricultural landscape and regional food market. Bio Solequo is actively engaged in knowledge dissemination and sharing

within the community. Over the years, the cooperative established collaborations with various institutions, schools, cultural associations, local farmers, and Slow Food Apulia. This partnership served for implementing an ongoing project aimed to establish the first Apulian Seed House preserving and promoting local vegetable varieties.

Ortofrutticola Egnathia is one of the two companies within the Miss Freschezza group. It was established in 1970 in Monopoli (Bari) and specializes in the cultivation of vegetables and fruits. It focuses on quality and food safety, ensuring traceability of their products. In 2000, a new production facility covering an area of 2.500 m² was built; it is equipped with storage units for raw materials and state-of-the-art machinery for processing fresh fruits and vegetables. In 2015, a significant modernization effort expanded the storage capacity and processing area, incorporating ozone technology for washing and storing raw materials, as well as a hydrocooler for rapid product temperature reduction. Over the years, the company expanded its land holdings from 30 to 100 hectares to meet growing products demand. Currently, the company employs approximately 120 people (both seasonal and permanent) and boasts an average annual turnover of about 10

Figure 4.
Fruits of Barattiere,
marketed by the
Miss Freschezza group
with the Baratti brand.





million euros. Recently, Ortofrutticola Egnathia focused on cultivating immature melons (*Cucumis melo L.*), specifically *Barattiere* (Renna *et al.*, 2020), *Scopatizzo*, and other local varieties of *caroselli*.

These varieties have excellent shelf-life, so that they are suitable for national and international markets under the brands Miss Freschezza and Baratti (Figure 4).

Baratti is the brand dedicated to *Barattiere*, recognized as a Traditional Food Product (PAT) of the Apulia region in 2006.

Miss Freschezza markets Baratti throughout Italy with major retail outlets such as Megamark, Famila, AandO, and DOK. Moreover, an entrepreneurial project launched in 2018 led to the sale of *Barattiere* in the Netherlands under the name *Cumelo* (contraction of the English words *cucumber* and *melon*). *Cumelo* is a remarkable case of commercial success, transforming *Barattiere* from a local variety at risk of extinction into a product representing Apulian traditions and appreciated in northern Europe for its exceptional taste and nutritional qualities.

Azienda Agricola Pasquale Ferrara is an organic farm of about 12 hectares in Conversano (Bari), which produces vegetables, fruits,

Figure 5.
Taproots of a local variety of carrot (*Dacus carota L.*) called *Carota di San Vito* harvested at Azienda Agricola Pasquale Ferrara.

olive oil and wine for Ferrara s.r.l. Ristorazione collettiva e catering involved in the catering business for over 30 years, serving schools, hospitals, social canteens and catering services. As part of its continuous policy of business improvement, the farm cooperates with the Department Di.S.S.P.A. of the Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro in the production of organic vegetables for mass catering, also using local varieties. The cultivation of local varieties under organic agriculture allows the users of Ferrara s.r.l.'s canteen service (mainly school-age children) to include in their daily diet preparations based on local and organic fruit and vegetable products (rich in nutrients and without pesticide residues), and to identify typical local fruits and vegetables as food and cultural heritage to cultivate and spread (Figure 5) (Bellomo, 2024). Ferrara s.r.l. manages the school canteens of ten municipalities in southeastern Bari, employing about 550 people and producing around 1,2 million meals a year.

5.3 Social cooperatives and the management of assets confiscated to the mafia: a legal model for agrifood production from innovative and alternative supply chains

Among alternative models of social innovation within the food supply chain, social cooperatives managed with assets confiscated to the mafia acquires a growing relevance in the national scenario. The prevention and suppression regulation of mafia phenomena is extremely complex and it concerns European and national regulatory interventions. According to the Law no. 109 of 1996 the assets confiscated from mafias can be reused for social purposes as they are valuable assets to be returned to the community. In recent years, there has been an increasing number of cases of custody of seized land to communities, entities, associations, social cooperatives and other types of non-profit entities and to operators of social agriculture. With regards to food production from farms dealing with social

activities, including the reuse of land confiscated to the organized crime, a significant implementation of the provision laid down by Law no. 109/96 crosses with the legislative rules on social agriculture, laid down in Italy by the Law no. 141/2015 (Canfora, 2017). The law laid down a national definition of welfare activities carried out in rural areas, pointing out their content as well as the legal entities involved in them. Thus, it introduces a change into the activities qualifying agricultural business, for the purpose of the Civil Code article no. 2135 establishing the extension of the application of special rules applicable to agricultural business. It recognizes the welfare services offered by the agricultural business falling within the scope of the law as a part of multifunctional farm activities, by widening the framework of public goods production.

The analysis focuses on the case study of the social cooperative *Altereco* in Cerignola, within the management of land confiscated from the mafia. Attention has been drawn to the role that agriculture can play in the re-use of confiscated land. The Law no. 109 of 1996 was promoted, through a campaign to collect signatures, by the association *Libera*. The main objective was to remove the assets accumulated by criminal organizations with their illicit activities and return them to society. In order to do this, however, it was necessary to act on different rules of anti-mafia legislation. The law Rognoni-La Torre (Law no. 646/82) introduced into the penal code the crime of association of a mafia type (article no. 416 bis Penal Code) and the seizures and confiscations for those convicted (Guerrini, 2020).

The Anti-mafia Code (Lgs. Decree no. 159/2011 amended by the Law no. 161/2017 and Law Decree no. 77/2021) provides two separate cases of reuse of property confiscated. The first hypothesis contemplates the transfer of the property to the unavailable assets of the local authority where the property is located, with the constraint of re-use of the proceeds for social purposes. Local authorities will be able to directly administer the property or grant it free of charge to communities, associations, social cooperatives and other types of non-profit entities and to operators of social agriculture (including not only social cooperatives but also farmers) (Costantino, 2021).

Altereco is an example of social cooperative in which is practiced social and reparative agriculture, in accordance with the Law no.

141/2015 on social agriculture and the Apulian regional Law no. 9/2018. The social cooperative deals with the inclusion of people in a fragile condition on land confiscated from the mafia, organic production, education to active citizenship and social anti-mafia as well as reintegration into the world of work for restorative justice. The idea was born from the need to generate a legal economy through the reuse of confiscated lands. Since 2008, Altereco works also in close contact with U.e.p.e. of Foggia, Foggia Court and Ser.T. and it welcomes about 20 people per year from the criminal area, from drug addiction and migrants in fragility situation with paths of reintegration into the world of work based on respect for people. All reintegration activities are in stark contrast to all forms of oppression, ill-treatment and, above all, against the gangmaster system who takes away dignity from the exploited workers. The aim of this activity is to practically demonstrate, through the care of the supply chain, the respect for workers and the enhancement of the product, that social agriculture generates a sustainable and clean economy.

The double level of governance on the re-use of assets provided for by law, requires compliance with a series of obligations by both public bodies and assigned private entities. It is essential that the assets are adequately mapped and that local authorities advertise the characteristics of goods and the prospects for re-use. Moreover, the assignees will bear a very significant initial cost for the restoration of the places (environmental remediation operations, analysis of the state of the land and the productive characteristics of the same) (Costantino, 2021). The social use of assets confiscated from the mafia appears to be both a model and a problem. In fact, there are many confiscated assets that remain unused or, worse, illegally occupied by the old owners. Often it takes several years to get assignments. A common problem in the experiences of confiscated assets is the difficulty in finding the needed funding. Even in the field of transparency there are many problems.

The reports drawn up by Libera note that many municipalities do not publish the list of assets confiscated in their possession or omit information relating to assets. Finally, it should be pointed out that the article 60 bis of the Law Decree no. 77/2021 has introduced interventions in order to accelerate the procedures about the

confiscated assets, to usefully lead the confiscation provisions to the implementation of valorization measures of the aforesaid assets. With regard to funding, a National Strategy for the Valorization of Confiscated Property has been envisaged, implemented through cohesion policies that allocate specific funds to the enhancement and management of confiscated assets. This funding is essential, especially in sight of the long period from the start of the judicial procedure to the final destination of the property.

Concerning to the problems that have emerged, it is necessary to point out also the need to take as a principle that the valorization of confiscated assets must be guided by a logic of entrepreneurship. In this way, the goods produced on confiscated land could become the subject of a system of supply chain that involves other companies, aimed to enhance the reuse of land in a productive key. The reference is to ethical certification tools linked to legality indices, respect for rights, recognition of the value of the product and fair price, which provide adequate information to the consumer about the value of the product, contributing also to the fight against agromafias and the spread of the culture of legality (Costantino, 2021).

5.4 Main conclusions and research perspectives

Food systems cannot be resilient to crises if they are not sustainable. The aim of Farm to Fork strategy is to redesign food systems, which today account for nearly one-third of global GHG emissions, consume large amounts of natural resources, result in biodiversity loss and negative health impacts. The profound changes that have characterized food systems in recent years have also strongly influenced public and private food procurement.

There are many examples of reorganisation of supply patterns especially in urban food systems, which contribute to achieve multiple goals of sustainability and food and nutrition security. In particular, are worthy of mention:

- initiatives to collect and redistribute unsold food and reduce food waste;

- farms involved in social agriculture projects training and employing disadvantaged people;
- farms devoted to the conservation and enhancement of local resources inside sustainable farming practices.

In projects aimed to recover, characterize, and promote local genetic resources, it resulted of crucial importance the partnership with research institutions, supporting farmers in the selection and production of local varieties of organic vegetables for mass catering, and the consolidated relationship with the final recipients of innovative products and services (schools, hospitals, social canteens, catering services). Also, these farms usually develop recreational and educational activities, healthcare services, integration of disabled workers, demonstrating how primary production can integrate social, environmental and economic sustainability to create effective and successful food models. The analysis of legislative framework regulating the re-use of assets seized and confiscated from organized crime and provided for by law, puts in evidence the difficulties of granting the compliance with a series of obligations by both public bodies and assigned private entities. In particular, it was highlighted the lack of an adequate mapping of the confiscated assets on the basis of which the municipalities can give timely evidence and publicity of the availability of land to be allocated. This, together with the difficulty of access to funding for the restoration of the places, severely limits the possibilities of allocation for reuse so that many confiscated assets may remain abandoned or illegally occupied by the old owners.

Authorship attribution

The authors of the paragraph 5.1 *Models of social innovation favouring public and private food procurement in urban areas* are Annalisa De Boni, Giovanni Ottomano Palmisano, Rocco Roma.

The authors of the paragraph 5.2 *Local food products and biodiversity preservation as a lever for public and private food procurement in urban areas* are Adriano Didonna, Onofrio Davide Palmitessa, Massimiliano Renna, Pietro Santamaria. The paragraph 5.3 *Social cooperatives and the management of assets confiscated to the mafia: a legal*

model for agrifood production from innovative and alternative supply chains is the result of research activities of the group coordinated by Irene Canfora and including Vito Leccese and Claudia Gesmundo. In particular Claudia Gesmundo wrote the paragraph.

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