MASTER THESIS REPORT

The Social Organic Consortium as a rural development tool for Sicilian agriculture

A study on Le Galline Felici





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Abstract

In Sicily, the last 50 years have been characterized by agricultural modernization. Farmers heavily relied on external inputs and techniques, which aroused environmental problems. After the initial success of modernization practices that increased the productivity, this rose until excesses of products flooded the market and prices fell, reducing farmers and labourers' incomes.

This research aims at unravelling the issues, ecologic and environmental, that Sicilian farmers have been presented with as consequences of modernization. Some farmers organized in producer associations to join forces for facing these struggles.

One association was identified, the Consortium *Le Galline Felici*, born as an answer to the commercialization issues and the advancing of environmental degradation. Some strategies developed by farmers in the Consortium can be defined in the rural development framework.

The economic and social rural development tools described in terms of *deepening* (valorisation of farm products), *broadening* (expanding the functions of the farm) and *regrounding* (mobilizing and reallocating the production factors outside the farm) the Consortium and its affiliates utilize are reported, also looking at practices chosen by farmers outside the Consortium.

I further argue about the role and actions of the Consortium in supporting marginal farmers and labourers and migrants, in the Sicilian island.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The European agricultural panorama had been characterized by the stretching of modernization practices throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The path toward modernization had been promoted by the Green revolution, with cheap provision of agrochemicals and heavy agricultural subsidies delivered by European policies. This approach to agriculture involved some key aspects: increased specialization and industrialization of labour and production, mechanization and externalization of agricultural operations, distancing between producers and consumers and the loss of connection with the sustainable aspects of rurality and selfsufficiency (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003). Initially, during the post-war development period, the outputs of this strategy seemed to be very promising, as farmers witnessed an increase in Gross Value of Production steeper than the costs necessary to steadily raise productivity. After the 1980s, however, the farm production costs of specialized enterprises based on import of external inputs began to spike. In the 1990s, two main opposing paths started to unfold, as a consequence of the agricultural prize squeeze and the incapacity to compensate for the high costs of the factors of production: rural exodus and further scale enlargement (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003). Smallholders whom had converted their farm into intensive mono-productions could not face the price squeeze and many decided, as only way out of their problems, to sell their properties and migrating to cities. On the other hand, many entrepreneurs whom had been relying on an economy of scales for decades, further enlarged their premises purchasing land from the defeated smallholders. This process has been very evident in the South of Italy, where the number of farm decreased by 37% in the decade 2000-2010. Meanwhile the average farm size increased by 79.4% (Schimmenti et al., 2016; ISTAT, 2012).

Nonetheless, a third path started emerging in the last twenty years, challenging the modernization practices that, for long time, had been central in the politico-economic agenda of European countries. This strategy has been broadly defined as rural development, or, more narrowly intended, as an increasing multifunctionality of farms.

Different countries, and different areas within countries, experienced modernization in different ways. The same can be said for the reactions to modernization. Very different strategies have been developed to "reconstruct the eroded economic base of rural economy and farm enterprises" (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003). More specifically, the situation on the Sicilian island is surely different from the remaining of Italy and Europe. The current situation of Sicilian farmers is quite precarious, due to several reasons taken into consideration in the following sections of this thesis.

In the East Coast of the island the modernization process entailed the conversion of farms to citrus production, mainly oranges, mandarins and lemons. From the 1960s onward, the importance of farm self-sufficiency was left aside. Technicians promised great incomes and success through the conversion of extensive farmland to intensive monoculture fruit productions. This process has been referred to as commodification of subsistence (Bernstein, 2017).

Currently, the price squeeze on agricultural products is seriously hampering the viability of farming enterprises and the survival of smallholders. Within the search for solutions to this serious problematic, some Sicilian farmers decided to gather in cooperative associations. It is

my interest to understand if unifying in producers associations has actually increased the selling power and the livelihood of farmers. Also, I am interested in understanding if rural development strategies occur through association and cooperation between farmers, and how this is managed under a labour organization perspective.

Sicilian agrarian history is imbued with cooperative presence and activity prior to the unification of the Italian state. Rakopoulos (2014) analyses the long evolution of cooperation in the region. Initially, it took the shape of sharecroppers unions, struggling against exploitative landlords, to be followed by *mafia* and *antimafia* cooperative movements protagonist of complex social and political interrelationships that shaped Sicilian history.

The first cooperatives developed at the end of the nineteenth century, with the aim of dismantling landholdings owned by feudal lords and redistributing the land over the sharecroppers, landless peasants that had cultivated it for long time. A recurrent pattern in the motivations that pushed Sicilian peasants toward aggregation in the last 150 years (Rakopoulos, 2014) is the search for a better livelihood and increased social and bargaining power, the reappropriation or occupation of land from big estates, and the rise of the *antimafia* movement in response to the violence that middleman (or *mafiosi*) perpetuated to control labourers and civilians on behalf of their landlords.

Cooperative associations have been, since the nineteenth century, not only a key feature of Sicily but also of the wider Italian economic scenario. Historically, they developed from different types of actors, which can explain why different models of cooperative emerge today in the Italian panorama (Fonte & Cucco, 2017). This diversity is reflected in two opposing approaches to producers cooperatives. On one side the focus is on the economic benefits provided to the members, the maximization of efficiency and economic competition. On the other side, we find a development of cooperatives based on social support and solidarity, so called "more-than-economic motivations" (Fonte and Cucco, 2017). The latter are going to be the focus of this research.

Farmers and cooperatives adhering to the second model are often embedded in what has been defined as Civic Food Networks (Renting, et al., 2012) and short food supply chains, considered a tool for rural development (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003).

In a study on the Italian economy, Giarè and Giuca (2012) underlined the importance of a reduction of the distance between producers and consumers through the elimination of intermediaries and big retailers and the building of trust obtained from a closer contact between these two actors. Other key aspects valued in short supply chains and rural development strategies are product features as seasonality, freshness and genuineness, along with concepts of territoriality, denomination of origin and environmental protection due to reduction or elimination of chemicals when adopting organic production methods.

Tudisca et al., (2014) focused more specifically on the Sicilian situation analysing the motivations of the development of short supply chains in single farms and how the implementation of different strategies, as direct selling, farmer markets, Solidarity Purchasing Groups (*Gruppi Acquisto Solidale* or G.A.S.), farm shops and e-commerce, improved and valorised endogenous resources, enhancing social equity and democracy. Some reasons identified as drivers toward the adoption of these methods are the generation of higher farmer incomes, improvement of economic performance and the development of new job prospects. Besides the economic aspects of rural development and increased livelihood, which enhance

territorial valorisation reducing the exodus toward cities (Tudisca et al., 2011), also the environmental aspect seems to be an important driver. Finally, these commercialization strategies create and improve the bound between producer, consumers and the local territory, promoting loyalty, trust and knowledge exchange (Guarino and Doneddu, 2011).

Varga (2019) explored the concept of Alternative Food Networks in relation with the solidarity economy network in the areas of Catania and Siracusa. Varga argues how, after the 2000s, the power of retailers and wholesalers embedded in the "corporate-environmental food regime" (Friedman, 2005) grew enormously, in Italy as in all Western Countries, crushing more and more the smallholder farmers and their economy in the current price squeeze. To rise their credibility and win credit at the eyes of consumers, some agribusiness companies and big retailers in the last two decades started to develop different certification schemes involving the concepts of Organic production and Good Agricultural Practices, but still keeping distant from the "civic" concepts of justice within the supply chain.

Varga (2019)'s work is a forerunner for the development of this thesis, providing deep insights in motivations that pushed farmers toward aggregation. He analyses the tools farmers aggregated in a specific association, the Social Organic Consortium *Le Galline Felici*, utilize to determine the value of their produce. He references this association as the largest solidarity economy organization in Southern Italy, active since 2002 (Varga, 2019).

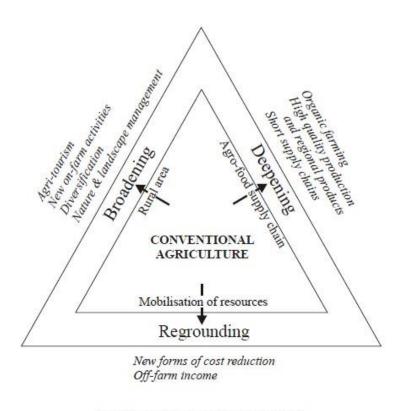
To clearly identify what a Consortium is, a definition will be given. A Consortium in Italian legislation represents a specific legal form of cooperative society with limited responsibility and provincial pertinence, constituted by agricultural entrepreneurs, or farmers. Its scope is to contribute to the increase and improvement of agricultural productions and social and cultural initiatives in the interest of the farmers that are part of it (Treccani, 2019). As the difference between Consortium and cooperative is mainly relevant from a legal point of view and not from a social one, in the context of this thesis the two words will be given the same meaning.

1.1. Theoretical framework

This thesis project aims at documenting the rural development strategies that the Consortium *Le Galline Felici* and its affiliates have developed in their farms, as well as strategies utilized by farmers outside the Consortium. I am also interested in researching the role and the actions of the mentioned Consortium in supporting marginal agricultural actors and labourers in the Sicilian island. Furthermore, I study more deeply and accurately the struggles that Sicilian farmers encounter in the social, economic and agronomical domains. Understanding the actual rural issues can provide a better comprehension of the social importance of associating in Consortiums. More specifically, this thesis project reveals how *Le Galline Felici* supports the members of its community in facing the mentioned struggles, what the concept is of new rural economy for the involved farmers, and how the social projects they support affect marginalized members of Sicilian agricultural society. To do so, I utilized the framework of rural development, analysing what practices, as described in Figure 1, are currently implemented by the Consortium and by single farmers belonging to different social classes.

The Consortium *Le Galline Felici* represents a real social entity, which can influence people's behaviour and can provide supporting tools for farmers' sustainable development, increasing livelihood opportunities and reverse the path toward poverty (Fisher at al., 2005). These are economic and social rural development tools, shown in Figure 1 and described in terms of *deepening*, as valorisation of farm products, *broadening* through the expansion of farm functions and *regrounding* via mobilization and reallocation of the factors of production outside the farm (Sotte and Finocchio, 2006; Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003). These tools are economic in a way that provide producers with decent, stable and fair prices for their agricultural outputs through new commercialization paths. Social because they allow the creation of a community network open to discussion and unity, supporting farmers and preventing them from abandoning agriculture.

The strategies of rural development summarized in the triangle suggested by Van der Ploeg & Roep (2003), reflect the need and desire to go beyond the rigidity and close mindedness of conventional agriculture, which showed, on the long term, to create more problems than it can solve. The concepts of multifunctionality and rural development stress the importance of using ecologically and socially fair and just practices for lifting up farmers livelihood. These are organic farming and commercialization networks that value the quality and origin of food (deepening), various forms of diversification of farm activities and practices (broadening) and investments (re-grounding). Farm diversification is a key factor to invert the trend resulting from conventional practices, currently eroding the ecological and social capital in Sicilian agriculture.



[New forms of co-operative management]

Figure 1. Structure of rural development at farm level (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003).

The agricultural model of production and reproduction in a specific area, Sicily in this case, widely varies in space and time. After narrowing down the research area to the Municipalities of Catania and Siracusa, I wanted to focus originally on the actual situation of labour organization and labour relationships among farmers, waged agricultural labourer and big capitalists landowners. These actors differently face daily choices and situations. Later, my focus shifted to the study of peasant strategies to tackle problems and more attention was given to the role of the Consortium *Le Galline Felici* and its importance in supporting different type of farmers and marginal workers. From the website of the Consortium (Le Galline Felici. 2021. La nostra azione sociale) it is possible to understand the ideology laying at the base of the Consortium's activities. It differs from the average individualistic principles, pushing farmers more and more toward competition, in a capitalistic view of profit accumulation through the inexorable increase of labour exploitation and land productivity (Bernstein 2010).

To understand which strategies of rural development are utilised by which type of farmer to tackle social, economic and environmental issues, I utilized political economy.

This framework questions the position of the peasantry within the capitalistic model that today prevails in the economic world and the balances occurring and governing the relationship between peasants, or farmers, and capital. It analyses the differences between farming, in a peasant way, and agriculture, or the capitalist agricultural sector. Bernstein (2010 and 2017) describes the latter as "farming *together with* all those economic interests, institutions and practices" characterizing the capitalistic model and the actors playing important roles in it. This framework allows to study social relations and dynamics of production and reproduction (Bernstein, 2017). It can be utilized to inquiry about labour relationships in agriculture, in this

case focusing on how Sicilian farmers belonging to different social agricultural classes organize their labour, how they relate with the wider capitalistic economy and which strategies of rural development they utilize in their strive for a better livelihood. The first step of the research had been the development of a scheme summarizing the characteristics and the different modes of production adopted by the interviewed farmers. A descriptive analysis of the faced struggles and the different types of labour organization had been performed, distinguishing social classes as "Rich, Middle and Poor" peasants, along with the production strategies they adopt.

The class differentiation utilized as guideline in this context had been elaborated originally by Lenin (1964a) and can be summarized and enriched as follow:

- "Emergent capitalist farmers" are characterized by the possibility of productive goods accumulation and reproduce themselves on large scale, also defined as "expanded reproduction".
- "Middle farmers" are engaged in simple reproduction, corresponding to the ability of reproducing the capital on the same scale of production as well as labour on the scale of consumption, without reaching wider scale.
- "Poor farmers" are those "struggling to reproduce themselves as capital" and so often obliged to sell their work outside the farm for making a living (Bernstein, 2017).

Interestingly, this framework allows to understand how marginal, or Poor, agricultural actors produce and reproduce, which are the means they can use and how are they supported by the society around them, while trapped in commodity relations (Bernstein, 2017).

An actor-oriented perspective was added, as it allows to start the inquiry from "actor-defined issues", in this case the struggles of Sicilian farmers in their everyday life. The documentation of practices that actors consider relevant for facing daily challenges and create their livelihood are framed within a wider scenario of social and economic organization in the area (Long, 2003).

A critique of this perspective is that looking only through an actor-oriented frame can lead to excessive specificity, and inquiring more on a single person level, leaving on the side the actors embeddedness in a wider social context that has to be considered during analysis. This research in particular considers the social heterogeneity that results from the inquiry of such different actors within the agricultural context (Long, 2003).

1.2. Research Questions

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION:

a) What are the strategies of rural development adopted by farmers belonging to different agriculture classes in the Municipalities of Catania and Siracusa and what is the impact of these strategies in terms of livelihood and labour justice on these actors?

SUBQUESTIONS:

- 1- What social and agronomic struggles Sicilian farmers face and how do these struggles influence their labour organization and choices?
- 2- What are the advantages and disadvantages that the different types of Sicilian farmers obtain from gathering in Social Cooperatives or Consortiums and following the paths of rural development?
- 3- Which is the impact on marginal actors' livelihood of the presence of the Social Consortium *Le Galline Felici* in the region?

1.3. Methodology

The methodology utilized to perform this study consisted in observation, informal and in-depth semi-structured interviews, supported by secondary data analysis.

The units of analysis are farmers and agricultural labourers working and living in the Municipalities of Catania and Siracusa (Figures 2 and 3), in the East Coast of Sicily. Agricultural workers are intended as waged labourers and migrants working in agricultural activities, farms or warehouses.



 $Figures\ 2\ and\ 3.\ Municipalities\ of\ Catania\ and\ Siracusa\ defined\ within\ the\ red\ of\ borders.$

To perform this research, the Purposive sampling strategy was chosen. It consists in deciding which type of people need to be interviewed for obtaining the desired results and consequently specifically search for them (Bernard, 2017). On the basis of the previously described class social division, I created five rural actors categories. The research topic calls for in-depth qualitative interviews and interviewee specificity, so I focused on finding respondents fitting into the categories.

ACTOR CATEGORIES:

- 1. Capitalistic entrepreneur farmers NOT in producers associations, previously mentioned as "Emergent capitalist farmers"; Are categorized as owners of more than 50 ha of land, cultivated with capitalistic arrangements and employment of waged labour.
- 2. Farmers adhering to the Consortium *Le Galline Felici* with "medium income", mentioned as "Middle farmers"; are categorized as farmers with more than 6 ha of land, cultivated through family labour and occasional seasonal waged labour.
- 3. Farmers adhering to the Consortium *Le Galline Felici* with "low income" and/or "landless", mentioned as "Poor farmers"; are the owners of less than 6 ha. Landless refers to farmers with no land owned or rented but relying only on the use of communal land. These farmers have partial access to resources, but do not gain enough from their farming activity and have to sell their labour outside the farm.
- 4. Farmers NOT united in producers' associations with "low income" or very limited access to resources, struggling to reproduce themselves.
- 5. Waged labourers selling their work to the second category, so working for farmers in the Consortium or adhering to projects that are linked to them.

The choice of farm dimensions comes from the analysis of statistic data from ISTAT, the National Italian Statistic Institute, that in the last national census of 2010-2011 recorded the average farm surfaces in the Municipalities of Catania and Siracusa respectively as 6 and 7.5 ha (ISTAT, 2012).

The choice of interviewing two groups of "Poor farmers" comes from the desire to understand if a positive impact of the Consortium on supporting marginal actors, occurs.

To understand what drives the choices of farmers and labourers some strategic cases for indepth analysis were chosen, following the footprint of the case-study method that Long (1989) describes as "life-world" of actors, in this case farmers; on one side farmers belonging to the Consortium *Le Galline Felici*, on the other entrepreneurs and farmers that strive alone for their livelihood and well-being. In this analysis, the issues experienced by the different types of farmers and the strategies these actors put in practice to manage these problematics were examined, to provide adequate context to the results regarding the application of rural development strategies.

To obtain the contacts of farmers to interview, I combined more than one strategy.

Firstly, I discussed with the historical founder of the Consortium, whom introduced me to the other members, forwarding my email with a general explanation of the research goals. Several farmers fitting in the categories 2, 3 and 5 showed interest and availability to be interviewed.

During the first meeting with the founding father of the Consortium, I realized the importance of warehouses in the labour organization panorama of Sicilian agriculture. In warehouses the agricultural products, mainly citruses, are collected, washed and sorted to be packed and shipped toward Northern regions and countries. I therefore included this aspect of labour in the research.

Secondly, respondents for the categories 1 and 4, had been searched through farmer markets, internet and triangulation of the results with information from farmers in the Consortium. Three farmers per category gave their availability for one interview. The research for farmers fitting

in these two categories presented some more difficulties. Entrepreneur farmers fitting in the first category are very busy and prone to delegate communications to secretaries and employers. Only three were willing to meet me, but the time they could dedicate for the interview was very short. Farmers fitting in the fourth category are, by definition, marginalized and struggling, with very little time to dedicate to extra activities, but I could get time for reasonably in-depth interviews with two out of three. However, I asked all the interviewees to suggest one or two acquaintances that could have been willing to give an interview. The final choice had been based on farmers availability and the level of interest and pertinence of their stories with the research themes. I encountered only one female farmer during the research and included her in the second category of the sampling.

Informal and in-depth interviews were performed with the fourteen selected farmers. Seven dedicated time to accurate farm visits, two gave me a fast tour because of lack of time and wide farm extension.

Five waged labourers for the 5th category, employed in farms adhering to the Consortium, or in their warehouse, were identified and informally interviewed.

To summarize, fourteen farmers were interviewed, four of them gave informal interviews, one of which was a relatively short phone interview, while the others dedicated few hours to answer my in-depth questions. Table 1 in the Appendix provide detailed information of the interviewed farmers, their farms and their labour situations.

The interviews were developed following the Life history technique, which aims at shedding light on social processes and relations through an analysis of the history of individuals (Gramling & Carr, 2004). In anthropologic and social research this technique has been utilized to describe the "interface of individual's life within a social structure" (Mandelbaum, 1973). Some risks can be identified when using this approach, such reliability and validity of information given by people, and possibility of misinterpretation of the researcher. To prevent this, research of scientific publications has been paired to verify the reliability of the received information. On the other side this technique can provide insight in the changes and evolution of a certain society or a specific group (Noor Rahamah, et al. 2008). Within the context of this research, the life history approach was utilized to gain knowledge about the evolution of livelihood, labour organization and strategies adopted in time by farmers to respond to the faced challenges.

The thesis is organized in two main chapters and the discussion. Chapter 2 attempts to analyse in detail the practical challenges farmers face in their work. I find this chapter very important, as to understand livelihood conditions and the possible way to reverse vulnerability and powerlessness (Fisher at al., 2005) a very clear understanding of reality is necessary. Chapter 3 focuses specifically on the Consortium *Le Galline Felici*, describing the motivations that stimulated its creation, its current structure and the rural development strategies adopted by the single farmers and by the association as a whole. The chapter concludes with the explanation of three Consortium's projects aimed at supporting the members' and migrants in the East Coast of Sicily. In the discussion, the rural development strategies utilized by the different categories of farmers are evaluated from a more analytic point of view. To conclude the discussion, I argue the importance of the Consortium for the support of farmers, labourers and migrants, posing attention to the centrality of relationships in the rural panorama.

1.4. Providing some context

I conclude this introductory chapter with a brief overview of some important phases and characteristics of Sicilian agriculture in the last century, to provide an overview of the historical facts which led to the current rural situations and problematics, which will be analysed in the following chapter.

The Italian peninsula had radically changed throughout the last two centuries. When the State unification occurred in 1861, agriculture was the activity providing employment to the largest share if Italians. In particular, Sicily was characterized by the presence of large estates owned by rich landlords and cultivated by agricultural workers, in Italian braccianti agricoli. From the second half of the nineteenth century, these labourers united in cooperatives in the attempt to improve their working conditions, more or less successfully (Rakopoulos, 2014). The twentieth century witnessed the catastrophes of the World Wars. At the end of the First, the real industrialization and modernization processes had started, and by the end of the Second entered in full regime. Nonetheless, wide differences could be observed among the different Italian regions (Petino, 2011). Sicily was still characterized by small rural household properties alternated with extensive estates, where everything was cultivated through ancient and traditional knowledge and practices. The large estates were ruled by landlords that, after the unification of Italy, increased their rate of absenteeism from the countryside (Schneider & Schneider, 2006), leaving space to the rising power of middlemen. They were taking care of the premises, and were allowed to use violence and threats to keep peasants under control (Blok, 1975). In this way the agricultural history of Sicily is intertwined with the *mafia* development history, although differently in different parts of the island. However, I will not go into details about the effect that the *mafia* had on agriculture during the second half of the twentieth century for a matter of time, as this would require extensive research which is not the aim of this research. It has to be kept in mind that the presence of this criminal association created strong limitation to the development of the Sicilian island and its agriculture.

After the end of the Second World War, agricultural labourers again gathered in cooperatives in the attempt to reduce the power of landlords and gain the right to possess the land they were cultivating. Those years witnessed estates occupation under the slogan 'give the land to those who work it' (Rakopoulos, 2014).

During the fifties, the State attempted to improve agricultural activities through land reforms and a subsidy system, with the objective of reducing latifundism in Sicily, also supported by the new-born European Union's Common Agricultural Policy. Rakopoulos (2014) describes this land reform as a failure, as it had been focused on the attempt to reduce the power of worker leagues by providing small pieces of land to single families and not to leftist labourer associations. The next ten to fifteen years have been characterized by a modernization of the agricultural sector, expressed through the spread of mechanization that promoted the exodus from agriculture, as human labour has been slowly replaced by machines. Anyway, struggles between the labourers that managed to become farmers and middlemen continued, shifting from land struggle to production and market competition, for example in the field of grape and wine production (Rakopoulos, 2014).

Agricultural intensification permitted the development of specialized horticultural and fruit productions, stimulating the increase of chemical input utilization. These intensive systems

developed also in areas where, prior to the introduction of intensive irrigation, it was impossible to grow cash crops but only extensive cereals, legumes and fodder. Mechanization and the indiscriminate use of chemicals promoted an increase in productivity throughout the seventies, supported by the first waves of migration of extra Europeans that made available cheap labour for harvesting. These modernization processes were financially supported by the European Union until the eighties, when subsidies came to an end, sometimes after causing detrimental effects (Petino, 2011). An example is the issue of surplus productions of oranges, derived from increased off-farm chemical input, which had to be destroyed in large quantities below the wheels of tractors on the roads (Personal communication, 2019). The market crisis and the steep decrease of selling prices of agricultural goods during the eighties, hampered the viability of agricultural investments and production of the most important crops in the area, citrus fruits, and in the same period utilization of mineral fertilizers reached a peak, leading the way for soil degradation. Nonetheless the strong impact of the citrus crisis of the eighties, the Sicilian economic scenario remained characterized by the strong importance of agriculture, and in particular of citruses and oil production, with scarce implementation of new and more ecologic innovations. By the end of the nineties and the passage to the new century, something started to change (Petino, 2011). The Common Agricultural Policy introduced new concepts of rural development and farm multifunctionality, contraposed to the principles of specialization and mechanization. Slowly, the need to apply new agricultural techniques based on landscape protection and ecological forms of cultivations and livestock rising to prevent the degradation of the economic, environmental and social capital of rural Sicily, emerged. The top-down approach to stimulate the economic and social recovery of agriculture in Europe had been strongly based on the utilization of "indication of origin" labels (Petino, 2011), to revaluate the eroded concept of typicality. These strategies, however, often did not reach the desired effects, due to the embeddedness in a capitalistic system which did not promote important aspects of distance reduction between producers and consumers, low selling prices of these typical products within retailing distribution, lack of protection from frauds and inadequacy of environmental regulations (Petino, 2011). Rural development strategies and promotion of farm multifunctionality have also been promoted by the European Union policies, but left room to farmers for deciding what could better fit their situation, without having to comply with strict regulations and protocols that were often not suiting very different farm situations. As recounted before, also the association in cooperatives can be seen as a strategy to recover from the agricultural crises which started in the eighties and still exerts some effect on agricultural producers. With these information in mind, it is now possible to describe how farmers perceive the rural situation, what they identify as important limits, and how they are currently attempting to overcome them.

2. FARMERS' STRUGGLES

This chapter will introduce the struggles faced by Sicilian farmers in the East Coast of Sicily. This will help clarifying what pushed some of them toward cooperation and the need for implementation of new rural development strategies. Working together and selling products through short food supply chains, when able to find agreements and common discussion points, can provide important subsistence means in marginal situations. All these problematics are somehow related to each other, although often this is not directly recognized by farmers. Climate changes affect soil quality, promoting erosion and fires. Dry and burned landscapes enhance organic matter and soil quality losses, opening the way to diseases and yield reduction. A spiral of poverty and reduced income is triggered, which can enhance lack of care, innovation, cooperation and trust but promoting pollution and criminality. Inexorably, this spiral provokes labour and commercialization issues farmers do not know how to deal with. In some situation this led to the formation of cooperatives and multifunctional farms, where open mindedness and resource availability allowed it. Throughout the thesis, the interesting example of association into *Le Galline Felici* will be proposed as a viable alternative adopted by small and medium farmers, to respond to the listed problematics.

2.1. Climate change, Water and Fires

Climate changes and the consequent extreme weather conditions are utmost important factors affecting agriculture in the East Coast of Sicily as all over the world. Since the end of the Twentieth Century, scientists have been discussing about the consequences of changes in global climatic patterns on human activities. IPCC reports (2001 and 2007) stressed the possible effects of global temperature rise, precipitation and winds' increasing intensities, sea level rise and extreme weather events in different parts of the world. Carraro & Sgobbi (2008) analysed the possible economic consequences of climate changes in Italy, linking the effects of extreme temperature and rainfall shortages to increasing desertification risks. Sicily is at high desertification risk, with consequent decrease of agricultural productions and touristic activities, leading to even further "unemployment in rural areas and consequent migration towards urban centres, conflicts over water uses, biodiversity losses and damages to properties and people as a consequence of increased frequency of fires" (Carraro & Sgobbi 2008). This sentence contains some key points emerged also during my research and already shows social and economic consequences of climate changes.

Sicilian weather is characterized by dry and hot summers and rainy winters. Temperatures and rain patterns differ throughout the island. Global warming is forecasted to induce a raise in temperatures of 2.2 °C to 5.1°C during this century in the Mediterranean climate zones, associated with increased dry spells (Giannakopoulos et al., 2009 in Talon, Caruso, & Gmitter, 2019). The areas of Catania and Siracusa present an irregular rain pattern, with the lowest amounts found in the *Piana di Catania*, the Catania Plain, the most intensely cultivated area of Sicily, devoted to citrus production (MeteoWeb, 2001).

Seven farmers out of fourteen mentioned climate change as an increasing problem. The highlighted points are the increased strength and power of wind and rainfalls, leading to flower and fruit damage or loss, decreased water availability due to reduced absorption during heavy

rainfall, higher difficulties in pests and diseases control. An example is provided in Figure 4, which was taken in December 2019, during my fieldwork. One of the visited farms located on the East slope of the Etna volcano was struck by a small tornado, which destroyed nearly all the banana plants. The same farmer, also an avocado and lemon grower, had already suffered from adverse weather conditions in spring, during the flowering seasons. Lemons have two flowering windows, in mid and in late spring. In 2019 strong winds, rain and the Lupa del mare, a salty fog coming from the sea, clashed against the Sicilian East Coast during the flowering periods. This damaged the blossoming trees, reducing fruit development in several farms. Other farmers expressed the same concerns recounting similar stories. In 2012 an incredibly strong hail event seriously damaged citrus trees in the area around Catania. Some orange and mandarin trees are now, after seven years, still recovering, and damages are visible on some branches. These events are more and more frequent, and nearly every farmer had at least one story of crop damages due to climate change in the last growing seasons. Extreme weather conditions can also affect pathogens development and distribution. Some fungal diseases are easily propagated by strong winds, spreading spores on previously healthy trees. Atmospheric uncertainties, extreme rain and temperature drops also weaken the trees, leaving them more prone to pest attacks.



Figure 4: broken banana plants on the Etna, struck from a tornado in December 2019.

Climate changes consequences are aggravated by the current water provision issue. Water is a natural resource strongly exploited in Sicilian Agriculture, laying at the basis of intensive citrus production. Water high costs and scarce availability seriously affect several interviewed farmers, more critically citrus and avocado producers located in the Southern part of the region. Cultivations on the Etna Volcano are less affected, as the mountainside facing the sea is the rainiest area of the island. Farmers expressed concern about the issue in their own different ways. Italian regions and municipalities have their own *Consorzi di Bonifica*, Water Management Boards. These Boards theoretically aim at managing water distribution through canals, irrigation systems and public urban-development projects, protecting environmental and agricultural heritage. In 2017 the Boards managing the municipalities of Enna, Caltagirone, Ragusa, Catania, Siracusa and Messina had been merged (Consorzi in Sicilia, 2020), leading to work overload and a messy water distribution organization. The growth of citrus fruits, the most important crops in the area, is negatively affected by water stress, which can lead to

deformations and abscission, reducing fruit size, quality and yield (Talon et al., 2019). Without optimum water provision plants survive but do not produce enough to provide a good income, and for this reason citrus producers are bounded to the Consorzi di Bonifica or must rely on private wells. The farmer from Misterbianco showed me an article recounting of farmers receiving electricity and Consortium bills around 2000 euros/ha in the area of Scordia (CT), with the obligation to pay also when the water did not arrive, which commonly happens. The same farmer, owning 34 ha of land, has private wells combined with water from Management Boards, to supply for the whole farm. He told, distraughtly, about an electricity bill of 13,000 euros he had received for the private wells' extraction electricity, to be summed up with the Board bills. Wells are expensive to create and to utilize, often need to be very deep (up to 250 m) and water is extracted through pumps with high energy requirements. He also underlined the inefficiency of the Consortium's pipe system, presenting important losses in several spots, also on his land. He recently created a system bringing water lost from a big connection pipe which was flooding his fields to the single trees, trying to take something positive out of this. This situation, shaped by inefficiency, political interconnections and corruption within the Consorzi di Bonifica system, is a primary concern for farmers. Since the year 2019 they are rising their voices and protesting, attempting to reach a more just and efficient irrigation system that could allow their survival in the agricultural sector (Agricoltura, 2019).

Limited water availability and drought in the countryside are strongly connected with environmental changing conditions but also with the problematic of fires. I was firstly introduced to this issue by the only woman I interviewed. Her farm, managed with other family members as a company, is located in Libertinia, Catania. The area is far from the coast, a hilly and dry countryside, with only extensive wheat monocultures and bare soils. The water table is below 300 m, too deep for extraction, making dry cultivation the only solution. She is one of the few tree growers in the area. Olives, which can live and bear fruits with very little water, are the main production. These trees are grown on turfed soil in the wet season, but the grass is cut and incorporated in late spring to prevent summer fires. Some years ago, she kept the grass layer during summer, with disastrous result. Her neighbour, which is also her cousin, burned his wheat stubbles in a field bordering with her olives and left without considering the risks. It was a warm and dry summer, and the fire reached the olive plants burning fifty of the more loaded with fruits. She brought to my attention possible fire causes, such as ignorance and carelessness. The practice of burning wheat stubbles is ancient and with different climatic conditions can be very useful. Nowadays it seems to be risky, mainly if not practiced with control, care and attention. Fires and desertification increase soil depletion, reducing organic matter and its important functions in supporting ecosystems. Degraded ecosystems are less likely to be able to provide livelihood to rural actors, creating instead poverty loops (Fisher et al., 2005).

Two farmers on the Etna Volcano exposed different causes of fires spreading in the countryside. The responsible seem to be hunters and shepherds desiring to get rid of farmers and cultivations. The more farming advances, the less land remains available for traditional activities such as sheep grazing and hares hunting. They explained about the traditional practice of burning stubbles and successively bringing the animals to graze on the new fresh grass, limiting the advance of agriculture. The solution one farmer living in Mascali currently adopts

is to create arrangements with shepherds, letting the animals grazing under his fruit trees. In this way his land is safe from fires meanwhile animals provide the trees with manure and he receives some cheese in return. The problematic of fires has been mentioned by farmers living in the Catania Municipality, but the area of Siracusa is not immune to the problematic. A farmer in Noto told me the threat of shepherds burning the land is present there too, and once flames arrived on his farm from outside, burning some trees.

The desire of land re-appropriation and carelessness seem to be the mayor threats for the farmers I spoke with, linked to the lack of management and resources from the State and the Region. This condition can open the way for disease, like the Citrus Tristeza Virus, to spread.

2.2. Virus and diseases: Citrus Tristeza Virus

Worldwide Citrus fruit production has been strongly affected from the outbreak of the Citrus Tristeza Virus (CTV) throughout the twentieth century. It firstly endangered citrus production in the American continent to slowly migrate toward West Africa and Europe. Different virus strains exist, leading to different symptoms, present together or singularly on a plant. The strain which seems more active in Sicily produces Quick decline, or Tristeza disease, consisting in the loss of affinity between rootstock and scion. The loss of affinity is evident in trees grafted on sour orange rootstock, which performs very well in Sicilian conditions and is resistant toward some fungal diseases, but it is not resistant to the Citrus Tristeza Virus (Continella et al., 2018). Incapacity to transfer water and nutrients from the ground to the upper part of the plant results from the affinity loss, with general yellowing and successive wilting of the attacked tree as shown in Figure 5 (Atta et al., 2012). The plant can die in one or few years. Atta et al. (2012) also described the history and distribution of the disease. Although it had been spotted before, the first hotbed in Italy was in 2002, and since then it is spreading on the island with an apparently random pattern. It propagates in two ways. It migrates to new regions through the transportation of infected propagation material, buds and vegetative parts of plant but not through seeds or fruits. It can also spread locally by the puncture of specific insects. As with other viruses, no chemical nor organic treatment can cure an infected plant, farmers have to rely on preventive measures, as the utilization of certified propagation material and insect control. Davino et al. (2003) researched the provenience of infected plants in an affected area in Siracusa. They have been illegally imported from Spain as budwoods, probably already infected. The reported number of infected plants in Siracusa in 2002 was around 10.000, with the virus still actively spreading. A farmer in Siracusa underlined the urgency of creating stocks of healthy propagation material in the region, as in his opinion nurseries sometimes attain propagation material themselves, illegally "stealing" it from other farmers fields when they run out of scions. Although not officially proven, if the nurseries propagation material is infected, it can lead to further expansion of the disease. The mentioned farmer has, for this reason, decided to invest capital for starting his own nursery, producing the seedlings himself to reduce this contamination risk.

During fieldwork, several citrus farmers mentioned the presence of this Virus in the Sicilian East coast and in their farms, although no one really understood it from a scientific and phytopathologic point of view. I spoke with eight citrus fruit producers in the provinces of Catania and Siracusa and the farms in the area of the *Piana di Catania* seem to be the most affected. It has to be kept in mind this area is the most intensively cultivated with citrus intensive monocultures. These farmers observed consequences on fruit quantities and quality. For example, one entrepreneur farmer owning a citrus processing warehouse selling to the retailing distribution, has increasing need to integrate his productions with other farmers' to deliver consistently to supermarkets. He is currently working on his land to substitute the infected orchards with new plants grafted on resistant rootstock, while buying new land to plant more oranges.



Figure 5. Orange tree attacked by CTV. As visible in this picture the virus attack can be so fast that a plant which is bearing fruits can wilt and die in few days or weeks.

Source: Foglie TV (2021).

A farm located in Lentini has been strongly affected by the virus in 2018 and the farmer was about to sell his land because of negative income. His orange trees are strongly damaged or dead, they need to be removed and burned. This farmer received help from the Consortium through a Co-Co-Production project. This interesting form of cooperation between one farmer, the Consortium and some consumers provided him with financial resources to reorganize the farm and replant trees. Initially these will be oranges, but successively other species to enhance biodiversity and other ecosystem services will be added. This type of support the association provides in a struggle situation is one of the most important points I gathered during my fieldwork, showing the possibility of creating new types of agreements between different actors that are usually disconnected within the capitalistic society. This project and the relations it allowed to create are going to be further analysed in the next chapter.

After extirpating infected orange trees farmers are largely planning to replant oranges, with a resistant rootstock. A citrus farmer told that although the virus resistant rootstock seems to respond positively when grafted with yellow pulp orange, he found less information about trials implemented using red pulp oranges of Moro and Tarocco varieties, typical products of the *Piana di Catania*. Incesu et al., (2013) and Continella et al., (2018) reported the scarcity of studies on the effects of different rootstocks in association with red pulp sweet oranges and worked on filling this gap experimenting the effects of different rootstocks, some of which resistant to CTV, grafted with Moro and Tarocco scions and reported the results in terms of productivity, quality, acids and anthocyanin contents. More research on this topic is strongly recommended, to provide farmers with reliable rootstocks choices.

2.3. Soil Depletion, Trash Disposal and Pollution

Effects of climate changes and virus outbreaks are supported and reinforced by the negative consequences of intensive modernization strategies as crop mechanization, monoculture productions, use of chemicals and lack of care toward the environment. Driving toward the different farms I observed the general agronomic trend prevailing in the landscape of the Municipalities of Catania and Siracusa. During fieldwork I drove an average of two hours per day, always paying attention to the landscape around me and the countryside's features. In this section I want to describe the general agronomic trend of rural areas as I observed it. Citrus fruits production emerged as dominant in the rural panorama, alternated with olive trees, almonds and some herbaceous crop, prevalently winter cereals and pastures. Citruses, mainly oranges, mandarins and lemons, are grown in large, intensively managed monocultures, mostly on bare soils often looking compacted, eroded and depleted.

My background as agronomist gave me tools to reflect about the characteristics of the countryside stretching around me as well as the visited farms. At the beginning of November 2019 several stormy events broke down on the Eastern Coast of the island and its effects were visible on the land. Roads have been covered by mud and rocks dragged away from bordering fields, worsening the condition of the roads and flushing away topsoil. From fields direct observation, the scarcity of water retention and infiltration due to compaction, lack of organic substance and soil vitality was visible. Some of these fields, as shown in Figure 6, presented soil waterlogging for several days, threatening the health status of citruses and other crops (Talon et al., 2019). Degraded land has a low ability to support crop production and this leads to possible strong reduction in crop yields on the long term (Rhodes, 2017). Generally, dry and warm climatic conditions that characterize the island, make it difficult but even more important to enhance soil biology and vitality, as an organic and biologically alive soil is known to better retain meteoric rain, preventing erosion and increasing crops water availability. Soil organic matter has a key role in the sustainability of cropping systems (Fageria, 2012), regulating and influencing nearly all soil properties from a chemical, physical and biological point of view. In dry areas with water availability problems, implementing regenerative practises for increasing and maintaining high level of organic matter, can help increasing water retention and availability. Organic and biologically vital soils are also more likely to give higher yields for farmers working in organically managed systems, because of enhanced nutrients availability and symbiosis with mycorrhizal fungi, also known to greatly improve trees water and mineral absorption.



Figure 6: picture of a waterlogged cereal field on the side of the SS417, important road in the countryside of Catania. This waterlogged situation remained for one week. Note the abandoned trash on the right corner.

Trash management and disposal are other standing out issues when driving in the countryside and were mentioned with deep concern by four farmers. The problematic emerges inside and outside the farms, on the sides of the roads, on the seashores, everywhere. Trash disposal system in the South of Italy has been disastrously managed for long time, in the hands of organized crime and *mafia* groups interested in the high revenues achievable through illegal waste disposal (D'Amato & Zoli, 2012; Pasotti, 2010). This problematic reached alarming levels between the 1990s and 2010, leading to a "state of emergency" in Southern Italy caused by the dangerousness of garbage and hazardous wastes traffic in and outside the country. Nowadays the situation seems to not have improved, garbage is still abandoned on the sides of the roads by citizens, due to the lack of infrastructures and proper management. This made me feel sad and defeated, not understanding how people can treat in such a disinterested way the environment where they live and on which their life depends upon.

These problematics seem scarcely felt by the Sicilian population. The consequences of chemical and trash pollution seem scarcely perceived, the lack of citizen's education regarding environmental problematics is evident. Few farmers and countryside labourers too, seem to understand the possible harmful results on the life and production patterns on the island.

2.4. Commercialization

Commercialization issues are a crucial point emerged from my research, and connects with the previous points, the need for new livelihood solutions and the consequent birth of the Consortium Le Galline Felici, on which I will focus in the next chapter. From a farmer's perspective, selling agricultural products for a decent price lays at the base of its livelihood. However, from what nearly all farmers declared, in the last decades this is increasingly difficult. The strongest emerged reasons are reduced yields and squeezing market prices. This is the result of a processes of "supermarketization" of agricultural products (Corrado, 2016 as in Iocco, Lo Cascio, & Perrotta, 2018) already started in the 1980s, embedded in a wider globalized "retailing revolution" (McMichael & Friedmann, 2007). Citrus producers are suffering more from this situation, during my interviews eight out of nine mentioned the problematic. Oil producers reported the issue too, while wine makers seem less affected. For beekeepers, the situation is even different. Selling their products for a good price is possible, but the production trend is very negative due to the problematics listed above, the most important of which pollution and environmental degradation. Nevertheless, the pressing consequence of supermarketization of the agri-food system is the low price the organized distribution offers to producers. For instance, the price of oranges sold as fresh produce on farm decreased from 0.26 euro/kg in 1995 to 0.15 euro/kg in 2010 in South of Italy (Iocco, Lo Cascio, & Perrotta, 2018). In the last decade it had suffered drastic yearly fluctuations, which strengthen the instability of farmers income (several Sicilian citrus producers, Personal communications, November 2019). What emerged from this "retailer-driven" process (Iocco, Lo Cascio, & Perrotta, 2018), is the presence of few powerful actors within the food system. These are transnational corporations in the food processing and retail chains, extending their "buyer power" over farmers of different classes, able to influence where, how, by whom, and at which price food had to be produced. Farmers must submit to these standards and conditions, to prevent remaining with unsold production. Through the imposition of stricter and stricter "quality" benchmarks, retailers pushed forward the rate of farmers social differentiation, promoting the marginalisation of medium- and small-scale farmers with relative disappearance of these types of enterprises (Iocco, Lo Cascio, & Perrotta, 2018).

An example provided by an interviewed farmer, relates to a contract drafted for selling oranges to a supermarket in Northern Italy. The oranges were firstly sorted on farm, then shipped to the supermarket, where a second sorting took place. Finally, only 30% of the initial harvest was accepted and actually paid to the farmer. Fruits unsuitable for the supermarket distribution were sold to the juice transformation industry for a price of 0,12-0,13 euros/kg, when harvested by farm labourers, less when harvested by the company's employees. This example efficiently summarises the commercialization concerns all citrus producers articulated.

Farmers belonging to the different social classes have been invested by the listed challenges, although to a different extent, and have been searching for alternatives to face the hegemonic "buyers power" experienced within the current economic system. In the East Coast of Sicily some farmers are responding to the socio-economic crisis implementing rural development strategies. From my inquiry, these mainly aim at restructuring the classical agricultural aspects of farms, the production and consequently commercialization aspects (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003). Within the Consortium, mainly *deepening* strategies have been brought forward during the last fifteen years. They were, and are, driven by the desire of shifting from the organized

distribution and supermarket retailing toward other players, whom recognize the added value of not conventional and high-quality fair agricultural products. The most widespread multifunctional strategy observed in the area of inquiry is a *deepening* strategy, namely the shortening of the supply chain through direct selling via internet or GAS (Solidarity Purchasing Group) of organic and high-quality regional products (Iocco, Lo Cascio, & Perrotta, 2018). The need for educating and creating critical consumers is closely related to the development of these strategies, as short food supply chains and direct selling properly function when consumers consciously enter these networks, understanding the reasons driving farmers' actions, needs and choices. These actions are based on reducing the distance between producer and consumers, through the Consortium's *G.A.S.*, on-line selling or the creation of facilities for attracting and instructing tourists, demonstrating the value of rural Sicily and the excellence of its traditional products.

Four Consortium farmers and two labourers spontaneously engaged in discussion about the importance of consumer's purchasing attitude, strongly affecting market prices. They think consumers have generally no idea about the true production costs and the required labour hidden behind the production of a canned tomato sauce they buy in supermarkets for 0,60 euros, or the oil bottle sold for 4 euros. "They search for the cheapest products, without considering how a 50 cl of tomato sauce, glass bottle or tin can included, could cost 0,60 euros without having underpaid or exploited humans, animals and environment." (Personal communication, November 2019). The oil producer from Libertinia declared herself ashamed of finding in a supermarket a 75 cl oil bottle costing 4 euros. She sells her oil for 11/12 euros per litre, earning no more than 0,50 or 1 euro per litre. It is evident how important consumer's purchasing choices and attitude can be in shaping the market. A shift in consumer's behaviour and understanding is strongly advocated by the Consortium's farmers, to revolution the predominant capitalistic production and commercialization strategies. The enhancement of citizen participation in the management and control of the food system in the shape of complicity between producers and consumers can lead to an increased "food democracy" and the birth of a more just production system (Renting et al., 2012).

Within the Consortium, some *broadening* strategies have also been observed, as for example two farmers, in Noto and on the Etna Volcano, are promoting rural tourism via agritourism and Bed&Breakfast, meanwhile working on a project promoting ecotourism within the Consortium's scenario. However, it is important to remember that farms located close to touristic areas have more chances to rely on income from tourism, while farms located in very marginal and remote areas need to rely on different types of rural development strategies. Besides gathering in farmer association, activities to valorise agricultural productions have been

Besides gathering in farmer association, activities to valorise agricultural productions have been researched and implemented too, mainly as *deepening* and *broadening*, to a less extent as *regrounding*. A farmer from Noto opened a family restaurant in the city, where farm products are partially utilized and advertised. He promotes farm tastings for tourists and is currently developing oenologic and gastronomic paths. Only one farmer out of the fourteen interviewed is implementing regrounding strategies: a capitalistic farmer able to invest considerable resources at present to reduce future costs (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003).

In this chapter I presented the main struggles the interviewees identified. Some do not relate directly with the Consortium, but are important to mention to clearly present the context in which the association was born, to understand the effect it has on the actors revolving around and in it. I have introduced the Consortium and some of the solutions, especially as rural development strategies, its members are implementing to face these struggles. In the next

chapter and in the discussion, the implementation of rural development strategies will be further considered and elaborated, not only from the single farmers point of view but also observing the Consortium as a whole entity.

3. CONSORTIUM "Le Galline Felici"

This chapter further analyses the Consortium, initially outlining its organizational structure and the motivations that pushed the interviewed farmers to create and participate in it. I will then touch upon its impact on the involved actors livelihood and the adopted rural development strategies.

Eight out of the fourteen interviewed farmers are Consortium's members and one is an occasional supplier, so they will be the focus of this chapter. Also, five labourers were observed at work and interviewed. To understand the internal dynamics of the Consortium, I had been allowed to observe, and partly participate in, two weekly Councils of Administration, for which I am very thankful.

3.1. Structure and Motivations

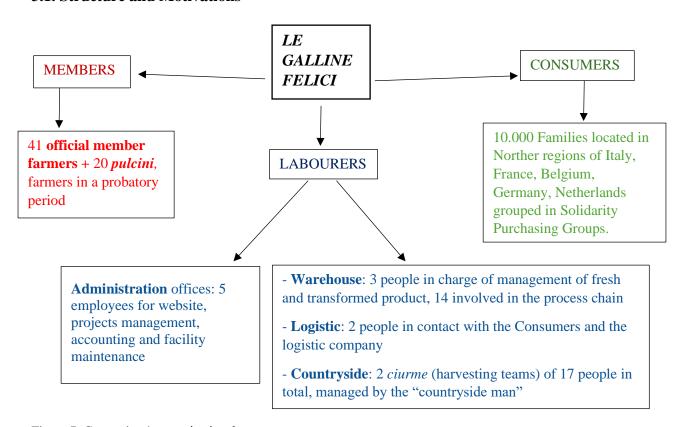


Figure 7: Consortium's organizational structure.

To better show the structure of the association, that together with the motivations are going to be the focus of this chapter, I created a chart, as displayed in Figure 7. The Consortium is founded on three actor categories, all fundamental in their ways to the functioning of the whole. The Members are the farmers who joined the association throughout the years, 41 in December 2019. Besides these 41 "official" Members, other 20 producers called *pulcini*, chicks, are the new recruits present in the Consortium's scenario and will, eventually, become official Members. To become a Member with all respects, some years of *pulcinaggio* are needed. This refers to a required probationary period, for Members to personally meet, learn about and completely understand the applicants attitudes. Farmers want to be sure the new members really believe, respect and apply the principles of environmental sustainability and labour justice. The

Consortium also works with occasional external suppliers, personally known at least from the countryside technician. Sometimes, they are asked to supply products, when Members cannot provide enough to satisfy the Consumers requests (from here onwards when reported in capitol letter, the word refers only to the Consortium's Consumers). It occasionally happens that farmers outside the circuit get their fruit sold through the associations' network, for specific reasons and behind reflection and discussion with the Consumers.

Consumers are considered very central actors in the association. Their level of involvement in decision making increased in time and contributed to the association's evolution. They are families living in the Northern regions of Italy as Emilia-Romagna, Piemonte and Lombardia together with numerous families in France, Germany, Belgium and a couple of organic shops in the Netherlands. These families are grouped according to their geographic position in different Solidarity Purchasing Groups. Each group has a referent in contact with the Consortium's logistic workers and a farmer Member, in charge of personal relations and shipment schedules. Marketing possibilities for citruses in Sicily are very limited and the Consortium does not have clients in the region, although some farmers sell a share of their products in the organic market of 'A Fera Bio, the organic fair in Sicilian dialect, happening in Catania once a month. Currently, the biggest challenges faced by the association are the selling of its products on the Sicilian territory and the increase of other farmers and citizens' involvement into a different approach to food and farming, through nature sustainability, labour justice and food sovereignty (Renting et al., 2012).

The Labourers' category is divided in people managing the administration and logistic, people managing the warehouse processing chain and two orange harvester teams. These will be analysed in detail in paragraph 3.2.

After providing this general idea of the association's structure, I will identify the motivations that stimulated its foundation. Due to the previously described motivations, achieving a decent livelihood out of their agricultural productions is a complicated matter for Sicilian farmers. The need for solutions to the agricultural price squeeze's effects experienced in the last thirty years, pushed some purposeful farmers toward setting the basis for the birth of the Consortium. Everything started in 2002 from the visionary idea of a pioneer organic farmer that had been struggling for years, producing organic fruits and vegetables that, for lack of alternatives, was sold through the retailing distribution for very low, conventional prices. This was often not providing him with sufficient income to maintain his family and had to occasionally sold his work outside his farm. He personally experienced deprivation as a result of the conventional supply trade and helped me reflecting upon the difficult position of Sicilian farmers within the capitalistic structure of the food chain, the exploitation they face, nowadays with little distinction between different social classes. "We are assisting to the rebirth of the latifondo, large estate, farms are less and bigger. This important transformation of Italian, and Sicilian, agriculture is a consequence of the vicious cycle that got created: selling products through the retailing distribution does not provide small and medium farmers with resources to fairly pay employees" (Personal communication, November 2019). Processes of further scale enlargement marginalize small-scale producers, often favouring bigger entrepreneurs (Iocco, Lo Cascio, & Perrotta, 2018), leading to a decrease of the former in the agricultural panorama. The association in Consortium provided small and medium farmers with a tool for remaining within the sector without being subjected to the hegemony of the retailing distribution, creating their own concept and practice of market.

This statement was forwarded by this specific farmer at first, and was repeated and supported by five other farmers. A smallholder based in Acireale declared: "In Sicily it is difficult to gain a decent living out of your production if you want to do everything correctly without cheating anyone, following your principles of ecology and justice" (Personal communication, December 2019). His initial motivation for joining the Consortium was strictly economic, as they offer a nearly unique stability for citrus selling prices. This price stability represents a key point for the Members. The price paid for all agricultural goods throughout the year is set at the end of every summer before the harvesting season starts. In contrast, prices in the conventional fruit market vary on a nearly daily basis and can float from 0,20 to more than 1 euro per kilogram, creating strong instability.

Anyway, after some time his motivations evolved, becoming more personal. This farmer from Acireale does not feel like a mere supplier but part of a whole, he feels connected with the other farmers, with the consumers and the labourers, he finally found like-minded people to share his ideals with, he knows he is not fighting alone anymore. For all the interviewed Members the socially supportive aspect of the association became as important as obtaining a good economic reward for their products, a chance to build something different on an island where illegality, criminality and individualism reign supreme.

Three other Members expressed social reasons when asked about their motivations. The farmer from Mascali is the only one stating he could economically sustain himself without the Consortium, but he strives to trigger a paradigm shift in Sicilian agriculture, extending his social project, educating citizens and consumers to the importance of sustainability and resilience, through the Consortium. He is pushing the association from within to explore new social possibilities, to start awaking Sicilian's minds toward a different society, based on equality and sharing. He is a particularly brave, and innovative farmer, quite far from the average, but I find his thrust toward the need for social and technical innovation important in the Consortium's scenario, pushing the other Members toward a continuous personal, social and agronomical evolution.

3.2. Labour

Above I have described Sicilian farmers, their struggles and empowerment strategies, but also important are the labourers within the rural scenario. In many situations, hired labourers play an important role in carrying out farm tasks, especially in large farms. Hence, in this section I will examine the features of labour within the Consortium, providing a contextualization within the wider Sicilian agricultural scenario. During November and December 2019, I visited the warehouse and a Member's field to meet and observe the labourers performing their daily tasks, as portrayed in Figures 8 and 9. We discussed about their perception of labour activities within the Consortium, with attention regarding feelings and attitudes for their job. We also discussed the differences comparing this job with other warehouses or farms in the area.



Figure 8: Consortium's warehouse: crates ready for shipping and labourers working in the processing chain.

Comparing the Consortium's warehouse with the entrepreneur in Palagonia show differences in terms of dimensions, number of employers and mechanization level. The Consortium's processing chain is smaller, providing employment to 17 people, while the wider entrepreneurial one offers jobs to 25 people, relying on a larger share of mechanized operations. Machines in the warehouse in Palagonia have a very central role, and the processing capability is larger than the Consortium's. They allow for an early harvest, as products can be placed in the degreening cell where are ripened artificially through the use of ethylene. A machine empties fruit boxes on the conveyor rollers, driving them to the electronic sorting and washing areas. On the other hand, in the Consortium's warehouse fruits do not get washed. They do not get in contact with water or any other preserving agent like synthetic wax. Also, the cost of the machine washing, waxing, drying and automatically sorting the fruits for calibre was too high for the association. They rely on a very well-functioning but quite small and easy processing chain. I was assured the provision of optimum working conditions for their labourers is a priority for the Consortium, which embraces labourers' suggestions for enhancing efficiency and comfort. The value produced in the association's processing chain is distributed among the farmer Members and not held by a single entrepreneur as the warehouse in Palagonia. In the former, the means of production result less centralized.

During fieldwork five Consortium employers were interviewed. The warehouse chief, responsible for the fresh products management and shipments, the responsible for the transformed products management, the "countryside man" in charge of harvesting teams and relation with the farmers. I also visited one logistic responsible, a Belgian man, in his small self-sufficiency farm. Finally, I interviewed one of the two migrants employed by the Consortium, a young boy from Burkina Faso hired in the warehouse in winter and in a Member's farm during summer. All of them have seasonal contracts with the Consortium for the winter months, while during summer they do different agricultural jobs. Some work in Member's farms, some in farms outside the Consortium, meanwhile the responsible for the transformed products dedicate himself to a volunteering association doing marine research and ecotourism. The Belgian responsible for the logistic dedicates his free time to work in his small self-sufficiency farm, helped by WWOOFers and volunteers.

These interviews deepened my knowledge about the practicalities laying behind the association's management, in continuous evolution. The actor whom mostly aroused my interest is the fresh products processing manager. He has been working for the Consortium since the beginning, when it still was a "small group of crazy citrus producers" trying to improve their livelihood conditions, collecting and shipping products from the storage house of a founder's farm, with any legal permission or agreement. This man worked as a seasonal labourer in this vary farm for some years, and still does it in summer, so it came natural for him to get involved in the Consortium. He describes how the experience with Le Galline Felici has been captivating from a human and working point of view. From a working point of view, he was entrusted with many important tasks, the amount of work is sometimes overwhelming, and from a human point of view because he feels to be considered a person and not a production unit. Working for the Consortium is a "love that overwhelms" (Personal communication, November 2019), a working love that makes less hard the difficulties of the job, motivates him to wake up from his bed in the morning with enthusiasm, very different from what his friends, working for other entrepreneurs, declare. He recognises the value of money, but believes it is not everything in life. Personal satisfactions and love for what we do are more important. He and his colleagues commit to consider everything about the other labourers, the Members and the Consumers. He has not seen this attention in other producers association in the area. The energy he put into his speech was impressive and very inspiring, his reasoning complex and deep. He explained how, historically, in Sicily there never was respect for labourers, considered somehow exploitable. On the other hand, giving everyone what he deserves is of first importance within the Consortium, everyone is on the same level and has something that makes him special and essential in a specific way. This point lays at the base of the association, and the new great challenge is to maintain it although the number of involved actors is increasing. This man's enthusiasm is visible, although he seems very jaded by the effort this job requires. His dedication has been noticed by everyone and the Members, as a thankful act, offered him to enter in the association as a Member himself. The Consortium offered him to finance the plantation of new orange trees in his property. He owns 1,2 hectares of land in Militello in Val di Catania, now completely abandoned for lack of time and resources, but through this funding he will work to uplift his farm once more. In his vision, giving new life to his farm relates with the desire to give his children, and youngsters in general, a new input, something to believe in, a dream, a passion, a reason to fight for. In his opinion, and I can only agree, new generations do not have dreams and ideals for their future but just wish for possessing materialities. "The system is responsible for the current situation" he repeats, also relating to the retailing distribution, consumerism and labour exploitation, "and maybe we are also responsible, as parents, of having made our kids' life too easy, they are poorly motivated because spoon fed by western affluent society".

The "man of the countryside" provided also interesting insights, although he could dedicate me very little time. He had been a Member since the beginning, but from 2014 his role has shifted. He stopped working in his own small lemon producing farm as the number of Members grew, requiring a full-time employee to check on farms, new Members, suppliers and harvesters. Occasionally he delivers the harvested products from Member farms to the warehouse. His farm is now abandoned, but he hopes to find the time to uplift it and start earning from it again. However, at the moment he is very busy managing the two orange harvesting teams, ciurme, and taking important decisions about when to harvest which products from which farm, according to the degree of ripening and the actual needs of the Consortium. These, in turn, depend on the Consumers' requests. This is a very important and complex task since many farmers desire to have their ripen products collected as soon as possible, for reducing risks of thefts or environmental damages. This sometimes creates tensions. He is also in contact with the occasional suppliers and has to promptly understand when extra products need to be purchased. Despite the difficulties of tasks and responsibilities he is very satisfied of his position and feels motivated, part of a whole. Also, he brought me to visit one of the ciurme harvesting oranges in a beautiful location.

A ciurma is a group of 5 to 10 harvesters working as a team throughout a harvesting season. These teams have one leader, capo ciurma, keeping contacts with the farmer, while the rest of the group has no relationship with the employer. This can sometimes lead to frictions and misunderstanding with the farmers. The two Consortium's harvesting teams have been formed by labourers of Member farms whom gathered skilled friends and relatives creating two groups. I had the occasion of chatting with the labourers of the smallest ciurma, very happy of seeing a young girl interested in their work (see Figure 9). They showed me how orange harvesting works, using scissors and ladders. They were currently harvesting a scelta, of their choice. It means only ripen fruits needed to be harvested, leaving the greener on the trees. They will return after few weeks to finish collecting the presently unripen oranges. They are all seasonal labourers and during the summer they work in different farms as pruners, tractor drivers, maintenance man, three of them in Member's farms. They expressed the same feelings as the other labourers: they really like to work with the Consortium, they feel respected and lucky having this position. I observed them working and realized they were proceeding fast and precise, exchanging jokes and laughs in dialect.



Figure 9: Ciurma of the Consortium harvesting oranges in Palagonia.

In this section I described with particular detail the labour organization within the Consortium, stressing on the personal features of the different workers. I find this very interesting as it provides a glimpse of how the Consortium value the members of its community and show some differences between labour relationships inside and outside the association. Interactions are of central importance within human societies, I therefore decided to inquiry more specifically about the relations present in the Consortium between all the involved actors. This is the focus of the next section, with a special attention for the producer-consumer relation.

3.3. The Economy of Relations

In recent years, new different types of cooperation emerged in the European scenario. These types of cooperation are based on new emerging producer-consumer relations within the food system. Scholars utilized various theoretical perspectives to better analyse these networks, defined Alternative Food Networks, short food supply chains or Civic Food Networks (Renting et al., 2012). Particularly interesting from my point of view is the development of the latter, CFNs, as it stresses the importance of relationships developing between producers and consumers toward new forms of food citizenship. It also identifies novel cooperation strategies between local actors as for example the farm labourers and is able to show the importance of the civil society in rural development (Renting et al., 2012). The activation and reliance on enhanced relations between producers and consumers can also be considered as a *deepening* strategies within the farm multifunctionality approach (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003).

During fieldwork, careful consideration was placed in inquiring about how Sicilians farmers perceive the relation panorama in the area they live. The first emerged point is the absence of relations among farmers and between them and the broader civil society. The second, on the other hand, is the strong importance that Members of the Consortium give to the strict and quite personal relations they built among themselves and with their Consumers, in strong contrast with the island trend.

Inquiring about the relations farmers wove around them in years of work, I was surprised in understanding they do not have relations with their neighbours and how rare reciprocal support is. Things are different for farmers within the Consortium, who strongly felt the need of getting close to each other to improve their livelihood, but they explained this is not the normality on the island. Normality is represented by "everyone for himself", as the farmer based in Acireale explained. There is no inclination toward the concept of "us", or "doing together" (Personal communication, December 2019). He sadly expressed not being able, after several attempts, to build relations with his neighbour farmers, he would like to exchange more.

All the interviewed Members suffered from isolation and remarked that the Consortium represents a blow of fresh air in the stagnating relationships scenario surrounding them. These people understood the importance of unity to face the issues and struggles of rural life. They see isolation of people and ideas as a major curse and promote the importance of concepts as "there is strength in numbers". For this reason, within the Consortium's context a good deal of attention is paid to build relations, between different Members, between Members and Labourers and between Members, Labourers and Consumers, with the objective of creating what they call the Economy of Relations. These relations are based on support, both economic and personal, mutual trust, respect and fulfilment of deals, correctness and friendship. The Member farmer from Acireale attempts to respect these principles with his labourers, although this took efforts and sometimes disappointment. He finds it very important to collaborate with reliable people, sharing his ideals about sustainability of production and labour management. Some employees, reminiscent of his uncle's farm management times, were not trustful and did not share his concerns and principles, so he continued the research until he found the two men with whom he could build a relation of "co-work and co-organization". He does not give orders, but they reflect together on what, how and why management and field operations are done in a certain way, he wants to "sow the seed of diversity" into his labourer's minds. In accordance, he does not want the Consortium to harvest his fruits. He feels loyalty toward the two people now working with him, always available when needed and relying on the wage the farmer provides to sustain their families.

Member farmers and Labourers also recognize the centrality of engaging with consumers and the broader civil society to bring forward the construction of alternative systems of food provisioning (Renting et al., 2012). To define the practical actions the Consortium takes to foster the shortening of the distance between all the actors involved in the food chain I will propose two socio-agricultural projects. They emphasise the importance of supportive relations between the different actors in the association.

3.3.1. The 'CO-PRODUCTION' and 'CO-CO-PRODUCTION' projects

Since the first interviews, the importance attributed to these two projects was underlined. I was deeply interested in the ideas that stimulated them and I was suggested to interview the interested farmers if I really were to understand the bonds present within the association. The so-called Co-production project started in 2017, bringing together five Member farmers and thirteen French Solidarity Purchasing Group. These actors signed an agreement consisting in the provision of funding from the Consumers to the Members, for financing the planting of avocado trees on 4 hectares distributed over the five farms. In return, the farmers will provide these families with avocadoes until they will have completely paid back to the Consumers the invested money. The project emerged from a market requirement, as French Consumers used to request large amounts of avocadoes, scarcely present in the Members farms. This type of collaboration represented something new for the Consortium, the beginning of a path based on the significance of supporting relations between producers and consumers, demonstrating that "strong relations generate concrete actions" (Le Galline Felici. 2021. Le Co-produzioni di avocado).

Two small farmers I interviewed took part in the project and recounted their personal experiences. The Member based in Acireale, on the foot of the Etna Volcano, experienced the project very positively. It gave him the possibility of planting avocado trees that otherwise would have been too expensive for his budget. Initially the plants were attacked by a mite but recovered very well and are currently growing big and lush, slowly entering in full productivity. The project represents an answer to the current "consumerism dictatorship" (Personal communication, December 2019), a reaction dictated by solidarity among different actors in the food chain and the desire to break the market mechanisms imprisoning small producers. With this project, consumers could decide what do they want and need from farmers, not only passively accepting what the retailing distribution proposes (Renting et al., 2012).

Despite the positive impact this project had on some actors, not everyone got the same hoped outcomes. Another farmer adhering to the project, based in Zafferana Etnea, reported a very different experience with the Co-production project. He explained the struggles faced during the first year after the avocado plantation and the resulting feelings. His farm is located on the Etna Volcano too, but at a higher altitude not very suitable for tropical fruit cultivation. Bad luck and bad timing also played a role: the first winter after the plantation had been the worse winter in the last 30 years in terms of adverse climatic conditions. Reduced water availability and low temperatures strongly damaged the plants. Initially the other Members blamed him, not recognizing the impact of the disastrous climatic events. A document pointing at his responsibility was published on the website, also asserting that new plants were planted with collective expenses. The farmer declared it was not true, he invested his money to substitute the dead trees. He thinks the other Members felt embarrassed and ashamed toward the French families whom financed the project. They attempted to give advises and repair the situation, but everyone gave a different advice, only creating confusion. This episode negatively affected the farmer, he felt very uncomfortable and asked to leave the association. He confronted with the other Members, which resulted in a final apology and a reparatory letter published on the website. The farmer remained in the Consortium, but inevitably took some distance. He is now less involved in organization, projects and administration. This episode shows that also when maximum attention is given to social support and people's wellbeing, detrimental spirals can be triggered, leading to vicious cycles of negativity difficult to exit. This specific cycle had been broken and the situation seems to have returned to normality. Though, it is important to learn from past mistakes and create clearer arrangements between the actors involved in projects of cooperation and coproduction. Farmers will need to be ready to face these situations in the future, as the criticality of environmental conditions on the island will make farmers' life more and more difficult and challenging in the times to come.

Apart from this accident, the Co-production project brought help to four out of five involved farmers, and after two years a new similar project emerged from its footprint. In 2019 the Consortium re-launched the idea, expanding the project toward different products and farm realities, giving birth to the Co-co-productions. The Consortium asked the Members' assembly about their investment preferences, and they decided for helping a Member, currently the President of the association, to uplift his farm. His citrus orchards got strongly attacked by the Citrus Tristeza Virus during the last year and he found himself in the position of nearly abandoning agriculture and forcedly selling his farm for lack of income. The farm consists in 11,5 hectares cultivated mainly with red orange trees of *moro* variety. For some years, the virus had been present in his land and in the surroundings, but recently it started creating serious damages, until it killed nearly all his plants between 2018 and 2019. "I thought I should have sold everything, there was almost nothing to harvest and I had no funding to buy and plant new trees", he confided to me (Personal communication, November 2019). The Consumers and the fellow Members decided to invest in the plantation of new trees, oranges grafted on a virus resistant rootstock but also various other species, attempting to increase biodiversity. The Consumers' action was fundamental, the importance of cooperation, transparency and the assumption of responsibilities from everyone's side laid at the basis of the initiative. One significant difference with the previous Co-production project occurs, as the Co-co-production project have been partly financed by the Consumers and partly by the Consortium as unique entity itself. The Members believe that "rescuing one of us leads to the salvation of everyone" and in the importance of helping a producer to continue existing as a farmer, although this means renouncing to a share of their already thin earnings (Le Galline Felici. 2021. Operazione Barbajanni!). This project is very innovative for them, and it is not possible yet to understand in which direction it will go and what its impact is going to be. By now it allowed a farmer to continue taking care of his land, although he confessed feeling a strong responsibility and weight on his shoulders, "I am not calm, I do not sleep well at night thinking about what could happen" (Personal communication, November 2019). These worries derive from his awareness of the risks produced by climate changes, the spread of diseases, the environmental and social instability surrounding Sicilian farmers. I look forward to following this story from close and see what are going to be its developments and outcomes. I personally see a lot of potential in this project and in the positive example the power of solidarity can give to the rest of the island.

Another positive impact this project provides is the position offered to the young boy from Burkina Faso working in the Consortium's panorama. He is employed in this farm, and he had been helping with the plantation and care of the newly financed trees in 2020. This boy represents a good example of the impact of LGF on marginal actors, due to his involvement in the previously mention project and in the project "Integration Is Future".

3.4. Migrants and the project 'INTEGRATION IS FUTURE'

Since the beginning of this thesis project, I had been very interested in deepening my understanding of the labour relations involving migrants in agriculture in the South of Italy. However, this is a delicate topic, requiring more time and capabilities than what I had available and for this reason I could not inquire on the level I had been hoping for. I discussed the topic with the interviewed farmers, which seemed to have little to do with migrants, and gather information from newspapers and internet research. In this context the word "migrant" is defined as person coming from a foreign country, legally or illegally, escaping from disadvantaged situations of war, social limitations, abuses and violence, in the research of new resources to increase their livelihood. Migration processes have increasingly interested the Southern regions of Europe since the eighties, stimulating the formation of what have been called "enclaves", which witnessed an increase in specialized intensive fruit and vegetable production (Iocco, Lo Cascio, & Perrotta, 2018). The agricultural sector went through a process of foreignization of waged labour, with a parallel increase of exploitation: migrant seasonal workers are often engaged with informal contracts intermediated by brokers (caporali) and receive very low wages. Very often they are relegated in "ghettos", forced to accept dramatic housing conditions (Iocco, Lo Cascio, & Perrotta, 2018). These processes have been witnessed, to small extent, by the interviewed farmers and labourers, whom provided some stories about this issue.

The Consortium's warehouse chief lives in Militello in Val di Catania and every day drives toward Catania for going to work. On the roadsides, groups of African young men, usually living in reception centres, wait for trucks collecting the required daily labourers. They are brought to citrus farms for harvesting, without contracts nor safety measures, working for indecent wages. He was not able, or willing, to point at the employers of these people, who are responsible for their work. He thinks this is a form of *caporalato*, a term utilized to describe migrants' exploitation in the countryside of Campania and Calabria from *mafia* affiliates, although in Sicily there is not a specific name to describe these illegal exploitative activities. In his view, the fault has to be addressed toward the State, not decently managing the migration waves pouring on the Sicilian's coasts in the last two decades. The State has not properly administrated the "migrant crisis", creating integration and job opportunities for these desperate people, that end up thickening the lines of criminality and black work. Two other farmers told me similar stories and expressed their concerns about the possible consequences of the sharp rise of share of migrant workers in agriculture. They are worried about a parallel rise in racism between Italians and refugees, already visible in the region.

Although farmers have all different and vague ideas about migrant's exploitation practices, newspaper articles clearly report these stories and interviews with migrants. The Sputnik journal describes the impact of the recent closing of the CARA of Mineo (*Centro Accoglienza Richiedenti Asilo*, Reception Centre for Asylum Applicants), a big migrant reception centre in the Calatino, a district of municipalities in the central-eastern area of Sicily. This centre had been running from 2011 until 2019, located in the countryside with no connection to cities. This centre arrived hosting until twice the number of people it was designed for, instigating segregation and violence. Migrants living in this premise, waited for years the arrival of legal documents, and meanwhile were recruited by caporals and middlemen for harvesting fruits. The journal outlines an interview with a young man that lived in the CARA of Mineo for one year before receiving papers and start working in a restaurant in Catania. He recounts the early alarm at 5 am and the evasion from the centre toward the collection areas where middlemen

were recruiting migrants for daily work. Wages were ridiculously low, from 10 to 20 euro/day, with any regard to their safety and rights. This article is one of the many, relating migrant exploitation to reception centres, in turns related to politics and *mafia* (Statello, 2019). It seemed Sicilians avoid thinking about these situations, preferring to bend their head and pretend this is not happening, in order to not risk repercussions on the safety of their productions.

The project "Integration is Future" developed by the Consortium does not focus on farmers as the previous ones, but on migrants' integration. Some specificities can be derived from my research and interviews. The word 'integration' has been widely utilized in Italy, to describe a process of socio-cultural, economic and political inclusion of outsiders in a new society (Samuk & Fontana, 2018). Scholars and European politicians assert this process needs to be addressed not only from the migrants' point of view but also accepted by the wider society and the receiving country residents. To be effective it has to be 'based on reciprocity of rights and obligations of third-countries nationals and host societies' (The Common Basic Principles, 2003). Nonetheless, fragmentation characterized the Italian integration policies and actions, and differences within the country's economy and migrant distribution pattern exacerbate these difficulties (Samuk & Fontana, 2018). A holistic approach is still missing, resulting in migrants' integration only within some of the inclusion processes, with broad differences within the country. For instance, it is possible to encounter economically integrated people, which did not, socially and culturally, merge with the Italian society.

The project 'Integration is future' represents a response to the need of a different hospitality and integration approach in the Sicilian Island. The project, supported by the CESVI association, consisted in providing theoretical and practical education to a group of twenty migrant youngsters living in hospitality centres in the municipalities of Catania and Siracusa. Organic agricultural practices and techniques were taught, to promote socio-economic integration and autonomy of the involved boys within the agricultural sector. Part of the initial plan consisted in creating a cooperative at the end of the educational period, involving the twenty trained boys, dedicated to agricultural work and green maintenance in the Member farms, and not only. Unfortunately, several bureaucratic and social limitations occurred, as "difficulties in obtaining legal working papers, the individualistic tendency of the boys and difficulty to interpret their expectations", striking out this attempt (Le Galline Felici. 2021. Progetto "Integrazione è futuro"). They finally chose five boys out of the initial twenty and organized internships in the Consortium's scenario. Three boys showed interest for remaining to work within the association. Nonetheless the economic difficulties of the Members, two of them are currently employed in summer in two farms I visited, while in winter one works in the Consortium's warehouse and one in a ciurma. The third boy moved to Milano after one year spent working and living in a Member's farm.

To better understand the impact of the project on these youngsters' livelihood, I interviewed one of the boys, coming from Burkina Faso. I firstly met him in the warehouse during my visits. He was the shyest of the labourers' crew. He did not dare to speak to me until I approached him showing my interest. I observed him relating with the Sicilian labourers, noticing with pleasure they were treating him exactly as the others. Shyness was visible from the boy's side, the shyness of somebody not used to be treated equally. He was listening to music during the break, instead of chatting with the others in the open air. His current position in the warehouse team is to unload the fruits from the plastic bins, arriving from the countryside, on the first conveyor

roller of the processing chain. It is the first job the new recruits usually do. He told me he will soon learn how to perform the other tasks related to the fruit shipment preparation. I proposed to meet him for an interview in Catania. We met in a park and had some street food together, chatting. It has been difficult for me to interview him, his shyness blocked me and I feared to touch difficult topics when asking about his life and past. Later on, I discovered he left his country after the murder of a parent, fearing to follow the same fate. He arrived in Italy four years ago, minor, and lived in a reception centre in Ragusa. After attending the project's training course, in 2019 he started working with a seasonal contract for a Member farm and the same winter he has been employed in the Consortium. He is very happy about his situation, reports to "find himself perfectly". He likes working with the group, they are good people caring for him, in the warehouse as well as in the countryside, he is allowed a lot of freedom. He wishes to remain in Sicily, he now has friends from Italy and from Burkina Faso there, with his wage he is renting an apartment in Catania with a friend. I had a very good impression from this boy, I saw in his eyes the hope for a better future.

The warehouse chief and my main informant expressed their positive opinion about the project, recounting their efforts to create integration and respect for these young boys, that have the same rights to receive a just wage as Italians. "It is a big bet, based on intelligent reception and not on assistance: it is a reception fuelled by the values of diversity, confrontation, coexistence and the desire to share experiences and resources. This is a laborious approach, but produces a lot of joy, satisfaction and beauty in return." (Le Galline Felici. 2021. Progetto "Integrazione è futuro").

4. DISCUSSION

In the previous chapters, I described the results of interviews and observations gathered from the fieldwork in Sicily. Farmers are currently facing challenging times, due to different interrelated problematics. Environmentally speaking, climate changes are having a very strong negative impact on production, exacerbated by reduced soil fertility, caused in turn by long and wicked overexploitation which followed the modernization thrust. Agronomic issues are tightly related to economic and social issues, as reduced production caused by extreme events, drought and soil depletion negatively affect farmers and labourers, and their capacity of rising and holding power in the food system. Degraded land shows increased vulnerability to climate change, especially to increasing temperatures and droughts (Rhodes, 2017). Sicily is a dry region and in several locations around Catania water is not available for agriculture at all, posing big restrictions to crop choice. Water management issues are, and will be further, aggravated by climate changes, as a water cycle alteration due to increased evaporation and rainfall reduction is forecasted to reduce rain events -4% in the Mediterranean areas (Parry et al., 2007 cited in Talon et al., 2019), accompanied by more frequent and lengthy droughts. The distinction between social classes seems to partially fade in the current situation, where climate changes and agronomic issues do not distinguish between types or class of farmers, but strongly damage everybody. An interesting differentiation can be done in terms of the different responses farmers are capable of putting into practice, and the level of resilience of these practices. However, this type of differentiation could not be fully analysed with the information I could gather during the fieldwork.

The impact of climate change and soil degradation is hitting hard as a consequence of the agricultural exploitation practices, deeply embedded in the modernization path, that have been implemented by farmers during the second half of the twentieth century, all around the world as well as in Sicily. The modernization paradigm promoted a steady increase of farmers' reliance on specialization of crops and labour, utilization of technologies and off-farm input, mainly fertilizers and pesticides (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003). As, in recent years, the weaknesses brought about by this paradigm are revealed, new paths have been explored by farmers to face the problems presented by nature and the capitalistic market. Generally speaking, two main different pathways are in front of farmers (Marsden et al., 2001). One consists in remaining on the modernization run, continuing to increase land surfaces and purchasing new technologies for incrementing efficiency and resources exploitation, with little reflection on the risks and consequences. On the other side, alternatives for a more sustainable development and regeneration practices are appearing in the Sicilian panorama as well as in the rest of Italy and Europe (Van Der Ploeg & Renting, 2000). These represent an example of reaction to the modes of production and consumption of the capitalistic system prevailing on the island.

By means of this thesis research I aimed at understanding what strategies are implemented by farmers belonging to different social classes to face the issues they find more pressing at the present moment. From the inquiry about supporting strategies the Social Organic Consortium *Le Galline Felici* emerged as an interesting example of cooperation between rural actors.

All farmers currently affiliated with the Consortium used to receive prices not allowing them to survive with dignity, and this was the initial reason pushing toward the foundation of the Consortium. Small and medium farmers were perishing under the purchasing conditions set by the retailing distribution and their intermediaries, which were, and are, exacerbating the previously described agronomic issues. Powerless and desolated, many found themselves under pressure to sell their land, but also very determined to do their best to prevent this from happening. Within this scenario they searched for solutions to escape from this critique situations. From this pressing need the Consortium bloomed in the backyard of a farm in Misterbianco. They invested energy and ideals, searching for alternative solutions to make a living out of their land without exploiting other people or nature. They found some answers in the form of rural development strategies, mainly focused on organic agriculture practices and the engagement with the final consumers, entering in the GAS network. However, not all farmers in the area are willing to associate in consortiums or cooperatives, but nonetheless started implementing rural development strategies, based on their preferences and the possibilities' feasibility. The analysis of what these strategies are and their impact on rural actors follows.

4.1. Class differentiation in rural development

I will now more specifically define the strategies of rural development adopted by the different social classes of farmers, addressing then the role of the Consortium in supporting and enhancing rural development activities. I use here the different categories as defined in the Introduction.

Capitalistic farmers NOT in Le Galline Felici

Capitalistic farmers developed more than one approach for responding to the current agri-food crises. On one side, continuing to invest capital for increasing the farmed surface and relying on further mechanization and specialization. In this view, increasing the number of citrus trees they own is the solution to support and increase their income. This is slowly leading toward a return to latifundium in the Sicilian rural scenario (Iocco, Lo Cascio, & Perrotta, 2018), as different farmers mentioned. A main concern which arouses in the face of climatic, environmental and disease related problems, is the increased risk of failure linked to large investment in agronomic means of production (Bernstein, 2010) as citruses monoculture plantations, highly specialized and not ecologically sound. On the other side, some capitalistic farmers realize that the outcomes of the modernization process their families promoted, are not sustainable in time. New solutions need to be researched and implemented. My interviews, and the stories I heard about other farmers, showed this clear difference, although more nuances exist within the panorama of rural development choices.

Among the category of entrepreneur farmers, I found that one of the interviewees is not adopting any rural development strategy, but still believes and relies on modernization practices. He is the only farmer of all the fieldwork interviews not adopting any strategy of rural development. This farm and its associated warehouse are in a process of expansion, the owner's family is investing in purchasing more land every year to convert into highly input managed citrus monocultures. Nonetheless, the economic situation of this farm is not stable and the prices, offered by the retailers they sell to, are every year lower. For now, the heavy reliance on

capital investment and mechanization is still allowing this farm to earn a living. Climatic, environmental and policies uncertainties can pose a future threat to the reliance on economies of scale entailed by this citrus producer.

The other two capitalistic farmers have, on the other hand, decided to adopt different rural development strategies, to invert the current negative tendencies of the farm costs increase and the reduced Gross Value of Production (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003). Both farmers adopted deepening strategies of organic and regional labelled productions. One of them is experimenting a broadening strategy, opening a restaurant managed by the son in a very touristic city close to the farm, through which his products are advertised and farm tastings and tours are promoted. The other farmer adopted a regrounding strategy, interestingly linked to the response to a serious issue. This farmer decided to invest considerable economic resources in the setting up of a tree nursery, attempting to produce healthy seedling of citrus and tropical fruit species, aimed at reducing the risk of Citrus Tristeza Virus infections via sick propagation material. During my visit, the nursery was at its initial stage, it would be interesting to understand which results in terms of farmer livelihood and plant quality it will yield. This is the only farmer interviewed that mobilized his resources toward an innovative way to re-ground his farm (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003). A farm nursery can significantly reduce the initial plantation cost of trees and can more easily keep control of the propagation material origin and health status. This could also lead to the creation of new on-farm income, if the decision of selling tree seedlings to other producers would be implemented.

Middle farmers in Le Galline Felici

The researched producers in the category of Middle farmers are all within the Consortium. They present intermediate characteristics compared to the previous and the next groups, strongly influenced by the histories of farm management but mainly determined by the reactions and solutions to adverse climate, diseases attacks, water management and commercialization struggles. All the farmers in this category apply *deepening* strategies, as the membership in the Consortium is only allowed to organic producers. Also, the selling through the Consortium and the Solidarity Purchasing Groups network represents a *deepening* approach, aimed at reducing the distance between production and consumption (Van Der Ploeg & Renting, 2000).

Three farmers out of four are also adopting *broadening* strategies. More specifically, one farmer has a beautiful agritourism with restaurant on the sides of the Etna Volcano, where he attempts to promote sustainable and rural tourism. He is also very actively engaging in social projects.

One farmer is currently working on the renovation of the farm buildings and landscape. His land is located very close to the city of Catania, and he desires taking advantage of this situation building a nature-inclusive kindergarten, where urban dwellers can bring their children. For promoting the social side of the farm, he is also creating a small "park". A neglected area on the back side of the farmhouse is being cleaned of wild plant growth and ornamental plants will be added, together with areas for sitting and relaxing which parents and citizens can utilize. This area can promote citizen involvement in countryside life and the direct sale of farm products, creating high added value for the farm.

The oil producer situated in the hinterland of Catania, attempted to implement a Rural Development Plan financed partly by the Sicilian region and partly from the CAP aimed at

reviving the small, abandoned village her farm and ancient household are part of. Bureaucratic technicalities stood in the way, and she could not obtain the necessary funding yet, leaving her very frustrated. For now, this farmer did not experience positive effects from the application of rural development strategies, but only frustration. To be able to improve the positive effect of rural development plans and investments available from the UE and the Sicilian region, clearer political arrangements and support may be needed.

The last farmer of this category is engaged in a rural development project implemented with the support of the Consortium and its consumers. It less clearly fits in the multifunctionality triangle designed by Van der Ploeg & Roep (2003). It is somehow a *broadening* activity, but it more importantly represents an innovation in terms of business model and I will go more in depth about it in the following section.

Small farmers in Le Galline Felici

Farmers owning very small surfaces of land present a very different pattern of labour organization and resource availability than the previous two categories. In the introduction they are categorized as "struggling to reproduce themselves as capital and labour", (Bernstein, 2010; Lenin, 1964a) often forced to sell their work outside the farm to be able to make a living. This definition seems difficult to apply to what I observed, as only two of them used to sell their work outside the farm, not as waged labourers but as agronomist and technician. The others are very absorbed in working in their dwellings and have no time to work for someone else. Two landless farmers have been identified, one in and one out of the association. They are beekeepers, in this case not struggling to reproduce their labour. Their limitations primarily come from technical, agronomical and pollution issues. Also, in this case the political economic definition of landless farmers does not completely hold as they do not sell their labour to other, but rather both have one person working for them in the high seasons.

As with the previous category, all farmers are adopting *deepening* practices of organic productions and commercialization through short food supply chains via the Consortium.

Besides, two out of four are utilizing *broadening* strategies. These consist in the presence of an agritourism in one case, and Bed&Breakfast in the other. The farms are located in touristic areas and this allowed the possibility of starting these activities, while farmers owning land in marginal and difficult to reach locations could more difficulty rely on this type of development strategy. Also, the setting up of agro-touristic activities necessitates an initial investment, in these case not provided only from farm incomes. One of the farmers invested money saved from his previous job of commercial promoter to buy his small farm and the B&B building on the Etna volcano, supported by his wife which works as touristic guide. The other farmer received an important help from his parents, which bought part of his small farm close to Noto, after he graduated as agronomist. The successive creation of the agritourism was made possible due to funding obtained from a Rural Development Plan. In these two cases the capital necessary for exploiting *broadening* strategies did not result from invested farm income but from capital coming from outside the farm. Without these investments, these two farmers that did not inherit their land would have found it very difficult to start farming and reaching their current situations.

The other two small farmers do not have the time and the resources to engage in further projects or strategy at the moment. They mainly rely on the benefit provided by their membership in the Consortium.

Small farmers NOT in Le Galline Felici

All three farmers belonging to this category are adopting *deepening* strategies. One converted his small citrus farm to organic production. The other two farmers are producing high quality regional products. All three are engaged in direct selling through their website. They all affirmed that without the possibility of shortening the supply chain through direct sell they would not have had the possibility to continue farming, as selling through the retailing distribution allows surviving nearly only to entrepreneurs able to process large amounts of product at fast rates (Personal communication, 2019).

One farmer, the beekeeper, relies also on the presence of a small Beekeeping Museum alongside his labour chamber. This form of new on-farm activity (*broadening* strategy) seems interesting and culturally important. Ancient peasant instruments and handmade beekeeping tools inherited from his family are exposed, an excellent way of preserving cultural heritage, fastly disappearing when farming is invested by modernization.

These farmers did not have resources allowing them to set up *regrounding* or other *broadening* strategies, they could not invest for enhancing the rural side of their farms and only continue relying on their small citrus, wine and honey productions. In this last point lies a clear view of the supporting importance of the Consortium for small farmers.

Consortium Le Galline Felici

After considering the different categories of farmers and their engagement with multifunctionality strategies, it is important to consider the Consortium LGF as a whole.

An interesting point regarding cooperation expressed by Bernstein (2010) is that "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts" (defined by Marx as "the collective worker"). Specific to this case, the Consortium as entity represents more than the sum of what is produced and could be sold from the single farms, and what the single producer or worker does cannot be understood in isolation from the activities of others (Bernstein, 2010). Social capital is created by the collective action of the united members and their choices. Investing for creating relations beyond production and consumption with consumers, labourers and migrants generates added value, that has been shown in the context of the described projects.

The Consortium represents a virtuous example in terms of farmer empowerment; as largely discussed before, it provides economic support in terms of product sale but also assisting producers in case of climatic and disease disasters. This was shown through the Co-production and, even more, the Co-co-production projects, that despite their flaws, were developed for promoting the livelihood of seven farmers. Also, the Consortium provides farmers with motivation, ideals, and moral support.

The association acts as a rural development tool, primarily through the shortening of the supply chain and the insurance of stable selling prices throughout the year. But I argue that another most important action consists in the socio-psychologic support given to farmers by the knowledge of being part of the Consortium, which allows them to feel confident expanding

themselves in terms of all three dimensions of multifunctionality. The provision of basic economic security, namely the insurance that farm products will be sold for a certain agreed price throughout the year, gives room and confidence to small and medium producers to start reasoning not only about the agricultural and supply chain side of their farms. This security can enable the research and implementation of new strategies on "rural side" and "resource side" of farming (Van der Ploeg & Roep, 2003). The interviews with the Members showed their interest toward the implementation of new on-farm activities, diversification, promotion of ecotourism and improve landscape management. Some are already working in this direction, due to the socio-economic support received in the last years. From a resource mobilization point of view, the association allows a different and major level or resource reallocation, as in the example of the two already mention co-production projects. Something the Consortium should continue improving is the technical support provided to farmers. This aspect is very important in the current precarious agricultural panorama, where resilient farming practices are required to face the uncertainties of the future. I think it is very important for the Members to find someone possessing knowledge, and at the same time flexibility, that could drive them into the research for new practices and agricultural techniques. This search can focus on learning about tropical fruits productions, as for now these are novelties in the Italian panorama and farmers do not know yet how to grow them optimally. One or more technicians should help providing scientific knowledge about soil regeneration possibilities, as well as strategies to improve water and nutrient use efficiency, to bridge between research and farmers, between experimentation and the reality of production. I think this aspect is also included in a discourse related to the mobilization of resources for implementing new forms of cost reduction, as one single small producer can seriously struggle to hire consultants, but the Consortium as a whole has the economic power to engage agronomists, whom can help implementing new agricultural practices to reduce costs and sustainably increase yields. For example, practices to increase water use efficiency or soil regeneration can, and I hope will, be implemented with external technical support.

To summarize, in this section I analysed the solutions that different classes of Sicilian farmers implement to increase their livelihood and incomes, within the framework of the rural development strategies. The actions of the Consortium Le Galline Felici in supporting its Members have also being explored from a multifunctionality point of view. In the next, and concluding section, I will discuss about the centrality of relations in the concept of new economy brought forward by the association, with attention to the labour and marginal actors conditions.

4.2. Reflecting on labour, integration and relations in Sicily

Labour pattern and requirements vary according to the specific crops and farming systems. Citrus production is the most relevant agricultural activity in the inquired area and had been the focus of this research. Citruses are the most intensively cultivated crops in the Catania Plain, a wide flat area where, as well as in other European plains, the prevailing production pattern relies on intensification, scale enlargement and a wide utilization of external inputs. This enabled a strong increase in land and labour productivity in the last decades but has also brought forward severe social and environmental problems such as air, soil and water pollution and labour exploitation (De Roest, Ferrari, & Knickel, 2018).

Capitalistic entrepreneurs employ the largest number of labourers, divided between the countryside and the citrus processing warehouses or wine cellars. The presence on the territory of these facilities derives from the modernization period, and currently provides employment to a large share of rural labourers. Often, employees in these facilities shifted from working on farms, theirs or others, to become warehouse specialized labour force. This is a consequence of the advent of mechanization, which radically changed the rural labour dynamics (Schneider & Schneider, 2006) in the last 70 years of Sicilian history.

New environmental conditions will lead to an evolution of labour according to the degree and type of changes the different categories of farmers will implement in terms of crop choice and farming practices. Sicilian farmers can benefit by expanding their knowledge about techniques of sustainable and regenerative agriculture, and the Consortium could represent an important factor for their promotion and adaptation to the specific farm situations, which is very challenging but also very important in this moment of climatic and productive insecurity.

As consequence of the modernization schemes that took place in the inquired area, some important features of labour emerged. Two related processes, regarding the change in composition of the agricultural workforce, can be identified. The first is the increased importance of non-family workers. This emerges when inquiring about farmers' wives and kids: only two farmers have wives working with them and only one entrepreneur is supported by his son and daughter, although not as proper farm workers but as agronomist and manager of the farm's restaurant. Several farmers manage their properties along with brothers and sisters. Also, this process led to the formation of the *ciurme*, groups of seasonal labourers harvesting citruses during winter months. The second is the process of "clandestinization" of labour (Van Der Ploeg & Renting, 2000), closely related and partly consequent to the reduced importance of family labour. This process witnessed a sharp increase after the Arab Springs in 2011, giving birth to the current migrant crises. The Italian governments attempted to tackle this crisis through a "humanitarian" approach based on migrant reception in "reception centres", as the previously mentioned CARA of Mineo (Iocco, Lo Cascio, & Perrotta, 2018). These centres, however, "had been frequently denounced by NGO and associations for the violation of human rights" (Iocco, Lo Cascio, & Perrotta, 2018). It is anyway complicated to investigate about these situations, and unfortunately, I could not inquire about them as deeply as I initially planned.

However, from my interviews I could understand that the Consortium represent and important enterprise to empower rural actors and to a small extent also migrants. Careful attention is given to the promotion of marginal actors' empowerment, but I still observed lot of unexpressed potential. Through the Integration is Future project, the difficulties to integrate

migrants within the Sicilian society had become visible, mainly caused by bureaucracy limits. There seem to be no clarity or facilitations for migrants that really want to learn and work in the countryside. Migrant exploited labour is currently a valuable resource in the fields, but it is not accounted for, as the larger share of these foreign workers does black work, is underpaid and exploited, allowing the survival and enrichment of the employers that usually have no interest to improve their social status or livelihood. Legislation inefficiencies and the interests of the people currently taking advantage of this easily provided cheap labour, create a very strong barrier to integration and migrant livelihood improvements. Nonetheless, as the mentioned project shown it is possible, with a lot of effort and time, to break through these barriers. I find it important that successful stories, as the example of the Consortium, are spread. Through knowledge and education, citizen, farmers and migrants can evolve toward a new different idea of coexistence in the same territory, helping and supporting each other.

After talking about labour and migrants in the Sicilian agricultural panorama, I will now reflect on the relations binding farmers, labourers and consumers. Farmers belonging to different social classes described their specific relations of production, and specifically, farmers in the Consortium characterized what they defined the "Economy of Relations". Widely speaking, two different types of relations have been identified among rural Sicilian actors. The strongest and clearer relations are present within the Consortium, and together with the economic support, they are seen as the biggest advantage of being a Member. In the association reciprocal help and support are very key elements, strongly contrasting what is experienced outside. Farmers, labourers and consumers are bound by solidarity, help, respect and friendship, consolidated through years of working together toward a common objective. This is the realization of a food production and distribution system allowing everyone to decently survive, while producing healthy food and advocating a shift from an economy of scale to an Economy of Relations. On the other hand, outside the Consortium the state of social relations in the rural arena is very different. Farmers do not support each other and are not interested in understanding what their neighbours do, why and how. On the contrary, it is widely feared that the interest showed for somebody else's farms is driven by the desire to steal their "secrets". Individualism is strong, and farmers recount mainly histories of negative interactions, as lack of trust and the desire to compete and trick others to be able to receive higher profits, especially in citrus production. Isolation can lead to higher levels of exploitation from middlemen and brokers, as for example one farmer alone often do not have the possibility to harvest and sell its citruses directly to consumers in other regions, having to rely on country jackals to obtain a revenue, although this is often very low and unsatisfying. Labourers also experience very different situations inside and outside the Consortium. They describe the difference as immense, the respect they receive within the Consortium is compelling, while in other working environment employees are viewed as factors of production, that must work and not complain, not even think.

The relation with the Consumers is the other important analysed aspect. The impact of the association on consumers differs according to their geographical distribution. The products cultivated and transformed by the Consortium are mainly shipped to families in Northern Italy, mainly in Emilia-Romagna, Piemonte, Lombardia, and Europe as France, Germany, Belgium, and a little share in the Netherlands. These Consumers have the economic means and the education necessary to understand the value of these products, whereas this is not the case in

the Sicilian Island. The impact on Sicilian consumers is still very little. Educating consumers on the island is a goal that Members feel more pressing than ever.

The current food system is characterized by a wide distancing between producers and consumers, due to the variable number of intermediaries and traders, buying from producers and then transforming and selling products in big markets or in supermarket (Di Trapani et al., 2013). The founding father of the Consortium described the development of personal relations between Members and Consumers within the Consortium as an "act of resistance" (Personal communication, November 2019) against the capitalistic and competitive food production system. It bypasses the retailing system and, in this way, empowers farmers within the food chain. Consumers are involved in the Consortium's decisional processes. Invited to participate and allowed to intervene in the Councils of Administration, they can create together and provide mutual help. The centrality of the Consumers in the Co-production and Co-co-production projects shows the importance of the Consortium and its relations for improving farmers' livelihood conditions in the territory. These projects showed a potential for promoting a "shift in the role of consumers from passive end-users and mere buyers of food products towards a role of proactive citizen consumer" (Renting et al., 2012). The Co-production project brought forward a new type of relation of production and showed a desire from the farmer side to change its status of commodity producer (Bernstein, 2017) toward a farming activity which enables to re-evaluate and reincorporate their position within the food system. "Citizen-consumers, in collaboration with 'citizen-producers', can actively reshape their relations with different stages of the food system and start revaluing the social, cultural and environmental meanings of food, beyond mere commodity and object of economic transaction." (Renting et at., 2012).

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis project aimed at researching the strategies of rural development adopted by farmers belonging to different agriculture classes in the Municipalities of Catania and Siracusa, and the impact provoked by these strategies in terms of livelihood and labour justice. The research journey started with the inquiry about the social and agronomic struggles Sicilian farmers encounter and how do these problematics influence their labour organization and choices. They recounted the difficulty of farming in a changing climate, where droughts, floods and unpredictable extreme events threat the success of their activities. Environmental problems sum up with plant diseases, and with the negative impacts of human disinterest in taking care of its planet. Reported examples are the high incidence of fires, the abandonment of trash in farmers' properties, the water availability and distribution issues. From direct observation, the poor conditions of many agricultural soils emerged. All these factors negatively affect farmers' income, which is already very low when farmers only have the possibility of obediently selling through retailing distribution, accepting their meagre prices. In the last 30 years, small farmers started abandoning agriculture, selling their farms to big entrepreneurs and consequently moving to cities, to work as waged labourers. Surrounded by this discouraging situation, a group of smallholder joined their forces to slow down this trend and attempt to remain in agriculture while making a decent living. From them the Social Organic Consortium Le Galline Felici was born.

The advantages and disadvantages the different types of Sicilian farmers obtain from gathering in Social Cooperatives or Consortiums and following the paths of rural development (Figure 1) had been analysed through this thesis project. The Consortium represents an important farmer enterprise in the Sicilian East coast rural scenario. In the last 15-20 years it provided an important alternative to the commercialization through big retailing distribution for small and medium farmers that would have otherwise been crushed by the price squeeze exercised by middlemen and supermarkets. The possibility, ensured by the association, to directly connect with consumers allowed farmers to continue cultivating their land organically and, at the same time, receiving a decent income to support and improve their livelihood. This is an important concrete action generated by the Consortium, together with the development of the three reported projects. One of these projects, the Co-production of avocados, presented some limitations that can be considered a disadvantage, as nearly caused one farmer to leave the association. The importance of clearer initial arrangements emerged. This issue underlines the difficulty of learning to democratically manage important decisions with a large number of Members, that are in continuous growth.

All farmers in the Consortium adopt rural development strategies. The most widespread is the adoption of *deepening* strategies as organic farming and shortening of the supply chain, through the action of the association. Also, farmers apply *broadening* strategies to create on-farm income differentiation, as for example the setting up of an agritourism or B&B, the organization of kindergarten classes and the realization of a park inside the farm. The *broadening* activities are realized in different scales, according to the resources farmers could invest, and generated positive outcomes, although to different extents.

Finally, the impact on marginal actors' livelihood of the presence of the Social Consortium *Le Galline Felici* in the region was evaluated. The focus, talking about marginal actors, is on migrants. The Consortium promoted a valuable project, "Integration is Future", aimed at integrating migrant work in the Consortium and not only. From the initial idea of instructing twenty migrant youngsters in the organic agriculture practices, only three had been able to continue the programme and start working, mainly due to bureaucratic limitations. This project showed that willingness and efforts can, slowly, make a difference and help people to change, improving, their lives.

To conclude, I just want to spend few lines of appreciation and support to this farmer association that managed to increase its social impact in such a difficult place where to farm. I recognise, in the current wider economic and ecologic situations, the importance of building resilience within the agricultural sector. The Consortium *Le Galline Felici* showed a very interesting potential to create a concrete change in mindset and practices within the agricultural panorama of the Sicilian East Coast. Creating relationships with Sicilian consumers might be a new important step the association could take, together with a wider exploration of regeneration practices, nowadays explored in different parts of the world, waiting to be adapted to the Sicilian rural scenario.

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7. APPENDIX

CAPITALISTIC FARMERS, NOT IN CONSORTIUM (MORE THAN 50 HA OF LAND)

Francesco and Alessandro, Palagonia, CT.

- 220 ha, conventionally cultivated with oranges, mandarins, lemons, artichoke, melon.
- Issues: relation with harvesters, Tristeza virus, thefts.

(Interview with one brother + visit to warehouse and part of the farm)

Salvatore and family, SR.

- 130-140 ha, currently in conversion towards organic and biodynamic system. Trees and vegetables: lemons and avocado (some peaches and apricots that gave bad results), potatoes (some fennel); nursery for his trees.
- Issues: environmental problems, diseases (infected seedlings), bureaucracy, commercialization, thefts.

(Interview + visit to nursery)

Felice and family, Noto, SR.

- 300 ha cultivated mainly with grape, citruses (bio), almonds (100 ha rented to other farmers).
- Issues: bad transportation system, commercialization, bureaucracy, mindset of Sicilians, taxes, electricity bills.

(Interview + wine cellar visit)

MIDDLE FARMERS IN THE CONSORTIUM (MORE THAN 6 HA OF LAND, ORGANIC)

Lidia and family, Libertinia, CT.

- 19 ha of olive trees (+this year new plantation of capers between olives).
- Issues: climate changes and weather, fires, lack of management on the territory, close mindsets of Sicilians.

(Interview in 3 steps + fast visit to one field)

Manfredi and family, Misterbianco, CT.

- 34 ha cultivated with mainly olives, citruses and grapes.
- Issues: old trees, weather and climate changes, commercialization before entering LGF, thefts, water costs (and bad management), Tristeza virus.

(Interview in 2 steps + detailed farm visit)

Vincenzo V., Lentini, SR.

- 11.5 ha of mainly citruses, currently they have been removed and he is waiting for planting new trees.
- Issues: Tristeza virus, commercialization outside LGF, weather and climate changes.

(Interview but no farm visit because he had no time)

Diego and wife, Mascali, CT.

• 25 ha cultivated with citruses, pomegranates, grapes, tropical fruits, agritourism.

• Issues: fires, inefficiency of public offices and services, laziness, "mental indolence" and suspiciousness of Sicilians

(Interview + visit to farm, agritourism and wine cellar)

FARMERS WITH LOW INCOME IN THE CONSORTIUM (LESS THAN 6 HA OF LAND, ORGANIC)

Mario, Acireale, CT.

- 2 ha cultivated with lemons, avocado, bananas and olives + 0.5 ha of forest.
- Issues: commercia-lization outside LGF, weather and climate changes (increase of droughts and extreme events), price of water, uneducated consumers.

(Interview in 2 steps + 2 long visits to the farm)

Paolo, Zafferana Etnea, CT.

- 3 ha cultivated with cherries, passion fruits, avocado and veggies (+ some not cultivated land in Messina), B&B
- Issues: fires, weather and climate changes (extreme events), thefts.

(Interview + farm visit)

Antonio, CT.

- Beekeeper + 1 ha to reduce taxes (rented, some olive trees).
- Issues: varroa mite infecting colonies and transporting viruses, weather and climate changes, fragility and high mortality of bees, pesticide contamination, hives thefts.

(Interview in the office, CT)

Vincenzo M., Noto, SR.

- 6.5 ha cultivated with lemons, mandarins and olives + agritourism.
- Issues: individualism of Sicilians, fires, water availability and cost, thefts.

(two days host in the agritourism, interview and 2 farm visits)

FARMERS WITH LOW INCOME NOT IN CONSORTIUM (LESS THAN 6 HA OF LAND)

Gaetano, SR.

- 1.5 ha of Moscato di Siracusa vineyard (wine of excellence).
- Issues: lack of trust between farmers, individualism, commercialization, electricity costs for refrigeration.

(Interview + farm visit and wine tasting)

Sebastiano and wife, Zafferana Etnea, CT.

- Beekeeper (bio) + 300 olive trees.
- Issues: abandonment by the State, taxes, vet incompetency, chemical and electromagnetic pollution, high mortality and weakness of bees, consumers' lack of education, thefts.

(Interview + visit to beekeeper museum)

Luciano, SR.

- 4 ha organically cultivated with lemons and oranges.
- Issues: water cost, lack and expensiveness of specialized labour, laziness of youngsters to work in the countryside, low selling costs for citruses through organized distribution.

(Only phone interview)

Table 1. Interviewed farmers summary, containing farm extensions, current issues and how I met them.

CT → Catania

SR → Siracusa

Farmer / labour	FARM LOCATION	HECTARS	LABOURERS	IN CONSORTI UM	
Francesco	Palagonia (CT)	220	10 + 60 harvesters (field) + 30 (warehouse)		
Salvatore	Noto (SR)	130-140	35-40 up to 80 (field + warehouse)		
Felice	Noto (SR)	300	10 + occasional contractors		
Lidia	Libertinia (CT)	19	1 + 2 to 7 harvesters	X	
Manfredi	Misterbianco (CT)	34	7 (3 shared with LGF)	X	
Vincenzo V.	Lentini (SR)	11.5	2 + one occasional	X	
Diego	Mascali (CT)	25	4 FIXED (field) + 1 (agritourism)	X	
Mario	Acireale (CT)	2.5	2	X	
Paolo	Zafferana Etnea (CT)	3	1 co-worker with arrangement + 1 (occasional)	X	
Vincenzo M.	Noto (SR)	6.5	1 (garden) + 1 (agritourism) + occasional contractors	X	
Antonio	Catania	/	1 + 1 intern from University	X	
Gaetano	Siracusa	1.5	5-7 harvesters, 2 for pruning + 1 oenologist		
Luciano	Siracusa	4	None		
Sebastiano	Zafferana Etnea (CT)	/	1 + wife + intern from University		

Table 2. Summary of labour distribution. Different colours represent different farmer classes: light blue for capitalistic farmers not in the Consortium; light green for capitalistic farmers in the Consortium; greenish-yellow for smallholders in the Consortium; bright yellow for smallholders outside the Consortium.

Farmer / Production	CITRUS	GRAPE	OLIVE	TROPICAL FRUIT	VEGETABLES	HONEY
Francesco	X			TROTT	X	
Salvatore	X			X	X	
Felice	X	X				
Lidia			X			
Manfredi	X	X	X			
Vincenzo V.	X					
Diego	X	X		X	X	
Mario	X			X		
Paolo				X	X	
Vincenzo	X		X			
M.						
Antonio						X
Gaetano		X				
Luciano	X					
Sebastiano						X

Table 3. Farmers' main productions.