



# Farming in the shadow of violent organizations: understanding farmers' relational place-making in socio-ecological crises

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## Abstract

This study investigates how farmers develop place-based relations when subject to structural conditions of violence and environmental crime. We particularly focus on environmental crimes perpetrated by the Camorra, the Neapolitan Mafia, at the expense of farming communities in the metropolitan areas of Naples and Caserta, in Italy. Farmers located in this area have struggled to mobilize collectively, with only a group of farmers enable to re-act to land exploitation, illegal burning or dumping, and more in general to the waste crisis. Stimulated by this rather puzzling empirical evidence, our research team engaged in a deeper investigation of the waste crisis, exploring how farmers located in the Land of Fires reacted to conditions of violence and environmental crime by developing a differentiated set of place-based narratives and practices. Using the Land of Fires and the waste crisis as an empirical context, in this study we focus particularly on conceptualizing place-based processes emerging in the context of organized violence and environmental crime. In our approach, these are structural conditions produced by the Camorra and the state, to which local agencies, such as farmers, respond.

**Keywords** Environmental crime · Waste · Place-shaping · Violence · Farmers · Mafia

## Introduction

This study investigates how farmers develop place-based relations when subject to structural conditions of violence and environmental crimes. We particularly investigate crimes perpetrated by the Camorra, the Neapolitan Mafia,<sup>1</sup> at the expense of farming communities in the metropolitan area of Naples and Caserta, in Italy. In this area, also described as the Land of Fires<sup>2</sup> (D'Alisa et al. 2017; Berruti and Palestino

2020), waste has been illegally landfilled and burnt in peri-urban farmlands, abandoned industrial estates, and mining sites, for more than 40 years (Iengo and Armiero 2017; Cavotta et al. 2021; Panico et al. 2022). Farmers located in this area have mobilized collectively mostly in reaction to a prolonged market crisis, while initially struggling against contrasting practices of land exploitation, illegal burning or dumping, and more generally protesting against

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<sup>1</sup> The Neapolitan Mafia is also known as Camorra. Similarly, to other mafia organizations, Camorra as an umbrella term identifies groups and clans operating in illegal markets and systematically using violent practices as part of their organizational strategies. While a detailed articulation of the involvement of the different clans in the illegal waste management business is outside the scope of this paper, it should be noted that a few clans, such as the so-called clan of Casalesi, has been particularly active and contributing to the waste crisis. For an overview, the reader may refer to D'Alisa et al. (2017) and Berruti and Palestino (2020), amongst others.

<sup>2</sup> The Campania Regional Agency for Environmental Protection (ARPA–Campania) has identified the ‘administrative borders’ of the Land of Fires as formed by 90 municipalities: 57 municipalities identified in the Directive of 23/12/2013; 31 municipalities in the Directive of 16/04/2014; and 2 municipalities in the Directive of 10/12/15. However, the identification of the Land of Fires with the whole of Naples and Caserta, and somehow the entire Campania region, has been long documented in literature and in public discourses (see for example Iengo and Armiero 2017).

environmental crimes. This suggests a pattern of differentiated responses to the waste crisis, in which farmers have been initially ‘passive’ to the structural pressures instilled by violence and environmental crime, and then become active and mobilized. Stimulated by the possibility of investigating this differentiated response, our research team engaged in a deeper investigation of the waste crisis, exploring how farmers located in the Land of Fires reacted to conditions of violence and environmental crimes by developing a differentiated set of place-based frames and relations. Namely, we reflect on the following questions: How can farmers’ differentiated responses to socio-ecological crises be explained? What is informing their responses? What is the role of place-based frames and relations specifically? Ultimately, what are the wider social, political, and economic conditions leading farmers to their responses?

To tackle these questions, and since in our observation farmers’ frames and relations assumed ‘place’ as a pivotal aspect, we decided to engage more decisively with studies related to sustainability and place-based struggles, for example looking at literature on relational place-making (Pierce et al. 2011; Murphy 2015), ecological struggles and environmental justice (Scheidel et al. 2018, 2020), place-based stigma (Malatzky and Couch 2023; Schneider 2017), and recent contributions to sustainability transitions from a ‘place-shaping’ perspective (Horlings 2016; Grenni et al. 2020). While appreciating the differences of how place is conceptualized in these strands of literature, they all suggest the opportunity to investigate place as an inherently socio-ecological and relational notion. In this literature, place matters in at least three ways: (i) place defines collective and individual meanings, and is thus related to farmers’ identity, including heritage, pride, or stigma; (ii) place connects farmers to other actors and defines the political, economic, and social norms to which they are subject, and relations in which they are entangled; (iii) place defines the set of resources available to farmers, and the competing and (un)cooperative spaces with which they need to engage. Moreover, in these strands of literature, place is made and shaped through the interplay between emerging conflicts (Pierce et al. 2011) or structural processes, such as globalization, pandemics, financial or climate crises (Horlings et al. 2020), and agencies enacted by local actors, such as farmers. As such, this interplay can be used to understand ‘spatial differentiation’ in response to socio-ecological struggles, and more relevantly to investigate and theorize sustainability transitions (Horlings et al. 2020; Grenni et al. 2020). Particularly, a *place-based approach* is key to understanding this differentiation because local agencies respond to emerging struggles based on different cultural, economic, and political relations (Murphy 2015) and socio-ecological conditions (Horlings 2016; Masterson et al. 2017). From this perspective, a few studies have

looked at farmers’ place-making in relation to socio-ecological struggles (Lai 2022), or the entanglement between agricultural practices and violence, for example in the context of migrant workers in agriculture (Mares et al. 2020; Holmes 2020), or in relation to women’s food security (Hayes-Conroy and Sweet 2015), or to understand alternative food networks as a response to organized crime (Marin and Russo 2016). In parallel, literature on environmental justice has used the notion of ecological distribution conflicts to explain contentious human–nature relations in the contexts of extractive industry (Ehrnström-Fuentes 2022; Ehrnström-Fuentes and Böhm 2023), illegal waste, and dumping, (Scheidel et al. 2018, 2020). However, and quite surprisingly given the still burgeoning literature on place-based studies, until now few scholars have tried to theorize farmers’ place-making or shaping related to organized violence and environmental crime. Using the Land of Fires and the waste crisis as an empirical context, in this study we focus particularly on conceptualizing place-based processes emerging in the context of violence and environmental crime. In our approach, these are conflicts and structural conditions produced by the Camorra, with the complicity of the state and private businesses, to which local agencies, such as farmers, respond.

The paper is organized as follows. In the following section, we present and discuss our conceptual background, focusing on relational place-making and place-shaping in sustainability transitions. In “[Methodology](#)” section, we present our research and methodological strategies. Findings are reported in “[Findings](#)” section, while “[Conceptualizing place-making relations in contexts of environmental crime](#)” section provides a rich discussion and further conceptualization of relations shaped in the context of violence and environmental crimes. Finally, in “[Conclusions](#)” section, we present our concluding remarks.

## Conceptual background

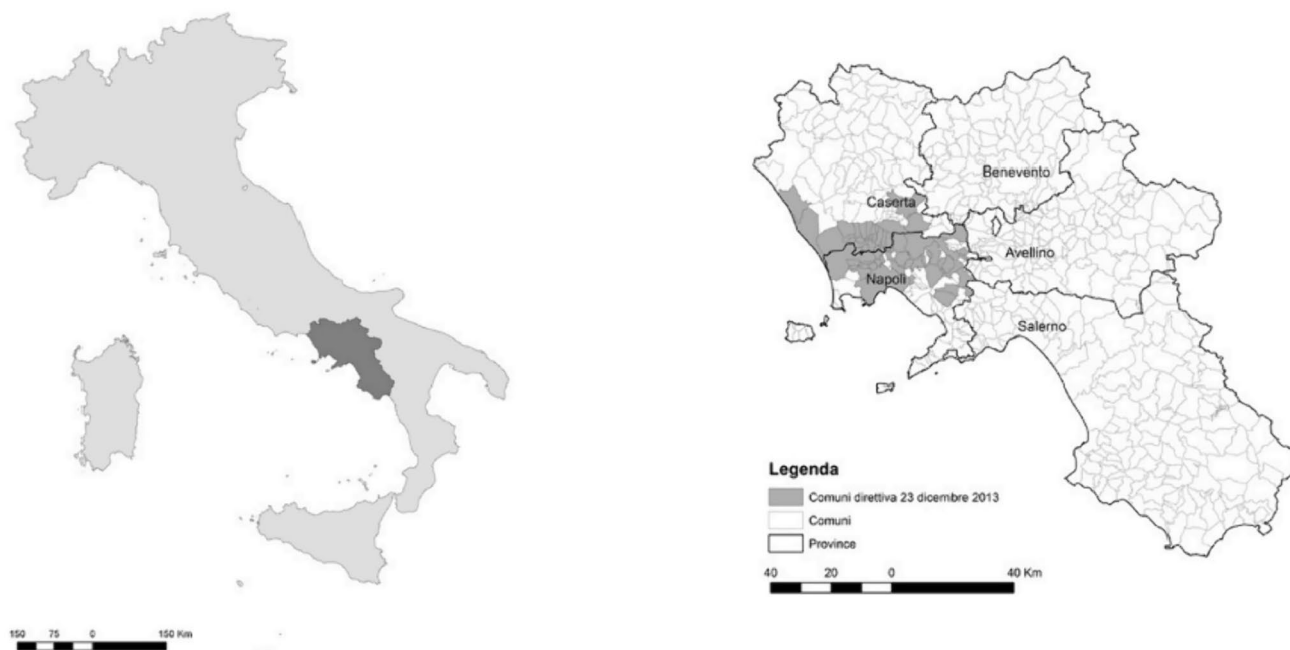
As indicated in the introduction, two strands of literature constitute the background of our initial conceptualization: on one hand the idea of engaging with the conceptual and analytical process suggested by relational place-making scholarship to investigate struggles and conflicts related to place, as well as farmers’ positionality (Pierce et al. 2011; Murphy 2015); on the other hand, looking at place-shaping literature to investigate key structural conditions underlining place-based relations (Horlings et al. 2020). Both strands coalesce in understanding place-making or shaping as a relational process aggregating individuals based on their collective ‘sense of place’, or a common place frame (Pierce et al. 2011). In this approach, a set of social, political, and material processes is enacted by actors

co-creating an experienced arena in which life takes place, with its meanings, materials, and relations. There is indeed a burgeoning literature on place-based studies recognizing the relational dimension of place-making, particularly looking at collective sensemaking and framing, the role of networks, and political and social processes (Martin 2003; Pierce et al. 2011; Zhang 2018). As indicated by Pierce and colleagues (2011), an empirical investigation of relational place-making can be articulated in four analytical steps: (i) first scholars should engage to distil and identify a conflict conducive to a quest for investigation or examination; (ii) subsequently, scholars should look into collective frames related to place in which the identified conflict is situated; (iii) then, scholars should identify key actors and institutions contributing to construct different place-frames, including conflictual ones; (iv) finally, scholars should focus on unpacking and further interrogating the positionalities of these actors and institutions in the conflict. Exposing conflicts, and conflictual place frames, as the pivotal dimension to investigate and conceptualize place-making, is particularly relevant in contexts where actors are immersed in socio-ecological struggles. These are places often examined from a perspective of ecological struggles and environmental justice (Scheidel et al. 2018, 2020), place-based stigma (Malatzky and Couch 2023; Schneider 2017), and more recently through relations of extreme precarity and exploitation (Courpasson et al. 2017; Hultin et al. 2021), diffused violence and environmental crimes (Vaccaro and Palazzo 2015; Cavotta et al. 2021). Particularly, there is increasing evidence that environmental crimes, for example through extractivism (Ehrnström-Fuentes 2022; Ehrnström-Fuentes and Böhm 2023) or by establishing waste economies, are perpetrated by those involved in organized crime (D’Alisa et al. 2010; Armiero and D’Alisa 2013) and too often supported by private businesses, and tolerated by the state (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Kröger 2018; Böhm and Pascucci 2020). Mafia-like organizations, for example, thrive on environmental crimes using control of territory to define structural conditions in which local agents are victimized while having limited voice, agency, or recognition by the state (Vaccaro and Palazzo 2015; Böhm and Pascucci 2020). Following this approach, we argue that socio-ecological struggles create relational place-making connected to violence and environmental crime, and conducive to place-frames of extreme precarity for local actors. These are conditions where social norms deteriorate, altering collective sense-making, for instance on what is understood as legal and what is not, and hindering local actors from prefiguring and envisioning actions to contrast with organized violence (Vaccaro and Palazzo 2015). Complementary to a relational place-making perspective, another strand of literature has also engaged in investigating collective processes shaping meanings and emotions assigned to a

particular place (Jorgensen and Stedman 2011; Masterson et al. 2017). Like the relational place-making perspective, in this literature place assumes a relational connotation, stemming from an assemblage of actors and practices (Horlings 2016). Place is in continuous transformation, shaped by structural processes, often driven by logics of accumulation, exploitation, and commodification (Harvey 2005). However, while these structural processes tend to manifest their influence ubiquitously, they have a *spatially differentiated impact* depending on how local agents react to these pressures. These responses are enacted by local actors in relation to their resources and capabilities, and their understanding and meanings associated with the place (Massey 2004; Marsden 2013). Particularly, in socio-ecological struggles, with mounting pressure from climate emergencies, ecological catastrophes, global pandemics, or exploitative market relations, differentiating responses are key to understanding place-shaping (Horlings et al. 2020; Grenni et al. 2020). In a recent contribution to place-shaping in sustainability transitions, Horlings and colleagues (2020) identify three core mechanisms of response worth noting: a process of place-shaping defined as *re-appreciation*, in which local actors can associate new meanings and values to a place (Marsden and Farioli 2015; Horlings et al. 2020). They define another response of place-shaping as *re-positioning*, where local actors engage in the creation of new institutional spaces, market relations, and social mechanisms to define a collective sense of place. Finally, they indicate *re-grounding* as a process where practices from other ‘places’ are experimented, adapted, and connected to the context by local actors (Horlings et al. 2020). This approach to place-shaping is particularly relevant to our initial conceptualization for at least two reasons: first it helps us understand place-shaping as intertwined practices and values; second, it helps us understand differentiated responses to socio-ecological struggles in a more granular way. Accordingly, place-shaping unfolds around the different emotional and symbolic aspects that people subjectively and collectively attach to places (Grenni et al. 2020; Dessein et al. 2016; Horlings 2016). Moreover, because places are the result of relational processes, they co-evolve in a flux of continuous change (Marsden and Farioli 2015; Horlings et al. 2020). In other words, places are the result of how actors and resources are mobilized (or not) (Massey 2004), including violence, marginalization, and exploitation (Harvey 2005).

We found a promising complementarity between the analytical and conceptual steps suggested by the relational place-making scholarship,<sup>3</sup> and the focus on differentiated responses to socio-ecological struggles as presented in the

<sup>3</sup> We are particularly grateful for one of the anonymous reviewers who suggested engaging with the relational place-making scholarship.



**Fig. 1** Map of the Campania region and land of fires. Source: Falcone et al. (2020)

place-shaping literature. They have informed our research questions and to understand farmers' differentiated responses to the waste crisis and the relational place-making processes with which they have engaged. In the following section, we present our research and methodological strategy.

## Methodology

### Research context

The Land of Fires defines an area composed by municipalities in the metropolitan provinces of Naples and Caserta in the region of Campania (southern Italy) (Fig. 1). This is a densely populated area (ca. 3 million inhabitants) characterized by an intense urban sprawling and diffused peri-urban agriculture. Since the end of the 1980s, toxic waste has been illegally burnt and buried in this area, with 2250 Potentially Contaminated Sites (PCSs) identified by the Regional Agency for the Protection of the Environment in Campania (ARPAC) (D'Alisa et al. 2017). This highly contaminated area has been strongly affected by the illegal activities, and since the 1970s has become a stronghold of Camorra organizations (D'Alisa et al. 2017). Before the crisis, this area had been known for high-quality horticultural and dairy products, and it is home to the internationally renowned Mozzarella di Bufala Campana (Buffalo mozzarella cheese), one of the most commercially successful products with the EU Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) label. Moreover, it

must be noted that the area is historically one of the most fertile farmlands on the planet, with rich soils due to the presence of several volcanoes (Vesuvius, Campi Flegrei and Roccamonfina) and equally rich and diverse agricultural productions.

The research team started to investigate this area in 2013, when the EU-funded LIFE ECOREMED project began with the aim of developing and demonstrating the effects of bio-remediation protocols of contaminated agricultural soils in the Land of Fires. The project kick-off coincided with the severe market crisis farmers were experiencing due to increased consumer concerns related to products from this area. Particularly, health and environmental concerns were raised due to high levels of soil and water toxicity, and risk of pollution for agricultural productions. When launched, the project aimed to identify tools to support farmers to regain legitimacy and empowerment to re-engage in place-based processes, through policy instruments to more rapidly adopt agronomic techniques for regenerating degraded topsoil, enhancing fertility, socio-economic vitality, and to establish a novel landscape economy in this region.

However, while engaging with farmers, the research team became increasingly aware of puzzling evidence, particularly related to how the waste crisis was presented, the role of the state and the Camorra, and the sense of relevance and urgency given to concerns related to both public and environmental health. The narratives emerging from interviews and data collection triggered a few questions: why were farmers so ambiguously positioning themselves against

**Table 1** Overview of data sources

Category	Data sources	# Entries
Secondary data		
<i>Press articles</i>	<i>Newspapers, blogs</i>	25
<i>Documentaries</i>	<i>Web, TV</i>	12
<i>Archival documents</i>	<i>EU, Italian National parliament, regional council</i>	45
<i>Academic publications</i>	<i>Journal articles, chapters and monographs (books)</i>	34
Primary data		
<i>Interviews</i>	<i>Interviews with activists</i>	3
	<i>Interviews with farmers' representatives</i>	2
	<i>Interviews with farmers</i>	11

the reality of a devastating manifestation of environmental crimes? Why have forms of protest been limited to only a minority of farmers or limited only to moments of acute crises with great media coverage? Why were they so disillusioned by the possibility of being supported by public authorities and policies? And why were farmers inclined to downplay the role of the Camorra in the crisis?

## Research strategy

To address these questions, the research team adopted an abductive methodological approach, and developed a theory-building from cases strategy (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Gehman et al. 2018) coupled with a process methodology (Langley 1999). This strategy led the team to understand farmers' differentiated responses to socio-ecological struggles derived from the waste crisis, and more relevantly to investigate and theorize sustainability transitions, using the Land of Fires as a rich empirical context. In this section, we reconstruct the key steps of our research strategy, as presented below.

### Step 1: data collection

The research team collected data using interviews, participant observations and documentary sources related to the waste management crisis.<sup>4</sup>

*Interviews.* We employed both deliberate and emergent sampling techniques to recruit informants. In total, the first author conducted 11 interviews with farmers and farm visits, and two interviews with key informants representing farmers' organizations operating in the area. We summarize the interview data in Table 2. Interviews were organized and facilitated by a researcher of the team in collaboration

with an agronomist operating in this area long term. Due to potential risks associated with the interview, an ethics protocol was developed to ensure anonymity and risk mitigation measures. Moreover, recognizing that retrospective accounts might be inaccurate, we followed methodological recommendations to improve the accuracy of these accounts. First, we interviewed farmers about their first-hand knowledge of the crisis. Second, we asked informants to recall specific events rather than generalized information, so as to frame the interview as a conversation to reconstruct their experience in relation to the waste management crisis. In the interview, farmers were asked to share accounts of their understanding of the crisis and to reconstruct its critical stages and effects. Interview protocols were structured as follows: farmers' understanding and perception of the crisis and its effects, origin, consequences, and their strategic response from 2008 to the interview date (2013/2014). The last set of questions aimed at clarifying views of respondents towards actions promoted by associations, cooperatives and, more generally, local institutions, aiming at "contrasting" the illegal practices of waste disposal and burning. Interviews lasted 60–90 min on average, and they were enriched with an on-farm visit as well as some observational data. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

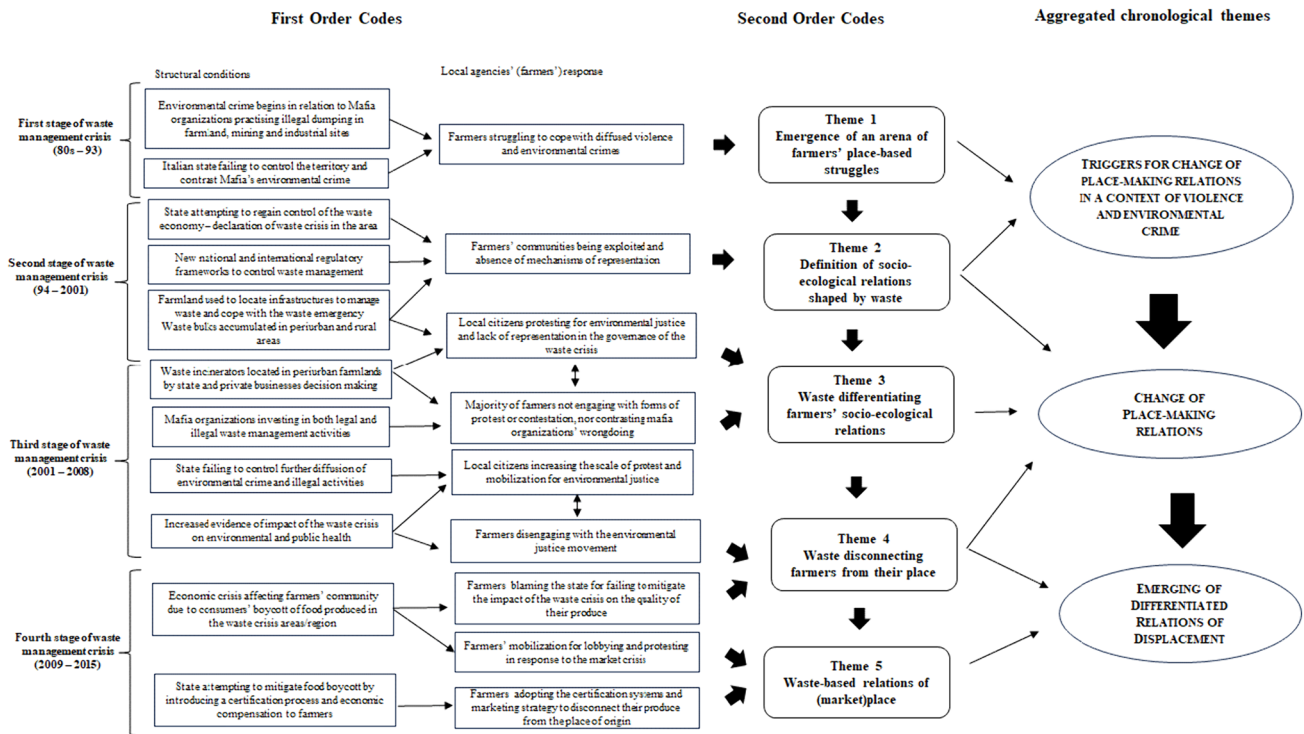
*Documentary sources.* We employed archival documents and publicly available data, including videos, newspaper articles, documentaries, and NGO reports, to triangulate and integrate the evidence emerging from the interviews and fieldwork. Particularly, we used secondary data from various sources, such as public reports, documentary videos, press releases, radio shows, press articles, and television shows (see Table 1). Documentary sources have been particularly relevant to identify structural pressures in relation to the state, mafia, and other businesses' actions.

### Step 2: timeline construction and informant validation

In line with a process methodology approach, the aim of this step was to produce an accurate, complete, and fair account of the Land of Fires as a social–ecological crisis.

<sup>4</sup> Data and information have been anonymized and managed in compliance with norms and rules defined by the Regulation (EU) 2016/679 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and the free movement of such data.





**Fig. 2** Chronological analytical process and data structure. Source: authors based on Gioia et al. (2013)

The first author prepared a detailed narrative and timeline of the Land of Fires crisis history. Then, she validated the narrative with other informants, researchers in the project, and other involved actors.

### Step 3: identification of emergent themes

In this step, the research team iteratively engaged with primary and secondary data, and extant literature, to theorize about farmers' place-shaping in the context of the Land of Fires crisis. Theme analysis was used to explain patterns in the emergence of different place-based processes. In particular, the theme analysis was performed in three stages. First, two authors noted and summarized the key concepts that had been emerging from the interviewees' accounts. Then, the same two authors compared notes and used them to define a list of codes. Subsequently, the research team coded interview transcripts and secondary data to define a timeline of critical events and their relationship with themes emerging from the coding process (see Fig. 2). In so doing, the research team moved from an informant-centred to a more theory-centred set of codes and themes (Gioia et al. 2013). In the "Findings" section of the paper, we discuss the themes that emerged from our analysis in further detail.

### Step 4: pattern matching with extant theories

The final step of our analysis entailed a comparison between emerging themes and the extant literature looking at relational place-making (Pierce et al. 2011; Murphy 2015), ecological struggles and environmental justice (Scheidel et al. 2018, 2020), place-based stigma and metabolic shift (Malatzky and Couch 2023; Schneider 2017), and recent contributions to sustainability from a 'place-shaping' perspective (Horlings 2016; Grenni et al. 2020). Empirical literature on the Land of Fires crisis was also mobilized to fine-tune pattern matching and theoretical coding. After a detailed review of these literatures, the research team agreed to re-code the data using constructs from relational place-making, place-shaping, organized violence, and socio-ecological crises.

## Findings

In this section, we present the findings identifying the key temporal and thematic dimensions of place-based processes related to farmers in the context of the Land of Fires. We start by presenting the data structure and narratives (Fig. 2). More specifically, narratives are described by themes/place-frames (second order codes) informed by key events and evidence (first order codes) organized in chronological order

and following the analytical structure suggested by Pierce and colleagues (2011) and namely: (i) identification of the key conflict(s); (ii) presentation of the farmers' collective (place) frames related to Land of Fires as a place where the identified conflict is situated; (iii) identification of key actors and institutions contributing to the construction of different place-frames; (iv) presentation of the position of farmers in relation to other key actors, such as the state, and the Camorra. Moreover, first-order codes were organized in structural conditions and local agencies so as to maximize the opportunity to identify farmers' differentiated responses to the waste crisis and environmental crimes over time.

### **Theme 1: emergence of an arena of farmers' place-based struggles**

The first place-frame that emerged in our analysis refers to farmers struggling to protect their farmlands from illegal dumping perpetrated by Camorra associates in control of the territory, with the complicity and interest of private businesses. In the early 1980s, in fact, there was increased interest in finding cost-effective solutions to dispose of toxic industrial waste leading to the development of an illegal waste economy:

In the early 80s all the Camorra families were involved in businesses related to building and construction, profiting from rebuilding houses after the Earthquake of 1980, winning public tenders through corruption and infiltration. Many families were involved in the mozzarella business, as a form of money laundering, as well as in managing restaurants and hotels. They already had the control of the territory. Using farmland as illegal dumps was just too easy a win for them [Activist #2]

Farmers' response to the emerging struggles is in line with other local actors, and a passive acceptance of the illegal dumping and in parallel the absence of the state in contrasting the Mafia's environmental crimes. The illegal activities of the Camorra were often based on their ability to control the territory using diffused violence and intimidation, profiting from other forms of illegal economies, including illegal building and construction, large-scale drug trafficking, and systematic infiltration in tourism and agribusiness. These were the pre-conditions for the emergence of a diffused illegal waste economy:

My brother and I were considered the law here. Businesses from the North (of Italy), local businesspersons, they all needed to get rid of stuff they did not want to pay for. We had our offices in this building, close to the farm, just over here really, and we were burying all sorts of rubbish, waste that made

us rich. We had used our farms and others, even if they did not want that. Nobody could say no to us! [former Mafia boss—TV documentary].

In this early stage of the waste crisis, which affected local communities and farmers for nearly two decades, diffused violence and environmental crimes contributed to the development of a collective sense of place based on passive acceptance. The scale of the problem was perceived as limited to illegal and violent practices perpetrated by the Camorra rather than the manifestation of more structural conditions in which a place, like the metropolitan area of Naples and Caserta, was becoming the illegal landfill site for cheap disposal of toxic industrial waste. In fact, while during the late 1980s and early 1990s illegal dumping and burning practices on farmland (Fig. 3) increased sensibly, the realization of being part of a wider problem did not occur to many farmers, nor their representatives, nor to other social and political actors. This is a stage of 'passive acceptance' of the diffusion of environmental crimes, still considered as a temporary problem:

There has been a period in which there was no waste collection, so people abandoned their rubbish at the roadside, here on the country lane too. This was not hazardous waste but domestic waste. Every now and then, there was a fire, which resulted in damage. We believed the problem was about waste collection in the city. [Now], in my view, waste collection is improving, the phenomenon is not very frequent. [Farmer interview #2]

### **Theme 2: definition of socio-ecological relations shaped by waste**

The second narrative presents a place-framing dominated by the state attempt to gain control of the illegal waste economy and related environmental crimes. In this struggle between the state and the Camorra, farmers become further neglected in the political and public debate, increasingly pivoting around concerns for uncollected waste and poorly managed landfill sites, framed as a social and public health problem. This place-frame defines farmland as a place to locate the needed infrastructures to start addressing the waste management crisis, coinciding with the Italian national government declaration of a regional waste state of emergency, in 1994. The immediate effect was the establishment of a special authority to manage waste collection, called the Committee for the Waste Emergency (CWE) in Campania. Its establishment formally recognized the inadequacy of the regional government to address waste management. Particularly, the uncollected waste in the streets of Naples turned the political discourse towards acknowledging the severity of the crisis, and the urgency to

**Fig. 3** Example of illegal waste dumping and burning in peri-urban farmland. Clockwise, from top left to the right, examples of urban and industrial waste illegally disposed in farmland or countrylanes; bottom left, fires and burning on an illegal landfill site close to a farm. Source: courtesy of an anonymous activist



resolve it. From 1994 to 1997, the waste crisis spread out dramatically, and partially because of the implementation of the European Union Directives for waste streams management (Decree 22/97). This new national legislation introduced the obligation for regional governments to implement a recycling plan at the local level and separate waste collection streams. However, many of the landfill sites in Campania were close to saturation, also due to the illegal dumping, with limited capacity to collect and treat newly recycled waste, and still with no incinerator in the region:

The [Campania] region was not ready to implement plans locally, while landfill sites were saturated by illegal dumping and ill-designed waste management procedures. This fuelled the tensions between waste collection at municipal level, and its disposal in regional landfills [Interview with former CWE manager—TV documentary]

The absence of a waste management plan and the limited capacity to recycle and use landfill sites fuelled the crisis, with severe waste collection problems in metropolitan areas and increased illegal dumping and burning in the peri-urban areas.

The strategy implemented by the CWE accelerated plans for using farmlands in the peri-urban area for the construction of new infrastructures to manage waste streams, thus further expanding the impact of the crisis on farming communities. In 2000, a consortium of Italian and German enterprises (FIBE) won a public tender for the construction of two

incinerators and seven treatment plants to transform waste into combustible waste blocks, with the state outsourcing waste management to private corporations. In parallel, waste bulks were produced without meeting legal standards to be burnt in the incinerators. Without incinerators, and the persistence of a poorly designed waste collection, all existing landfill sites in the region reached their full capacity, and the ill-designed and treated waste bulks started to accumulate in new sites, created on farmlands confiscated from farmers by the state (see Fig. 4).

### Theme 3: waste differentiating farmers' socio-ecological relations

During the subsequent 8 years, from 2001 to 2009, waste became the resource shaping all key narratives and practices in the region, transforming the waste economy in a wider place-shaping process. Farmlands in peri-urban and rural areas continued to be used as sites for new waste management infrastructure, since the continued emergency pushed CWE to increase the capacity of existing landfill sites and similarly identify new sites, as well as open the first waste treatment plant and an incinerator in the municipality of Acerra (Fig. 4).

The waste bulks production was unlawful due to non-compliance with European environmental standards, creating illegal waste management practices connected to public activities. The absence of any functioning incinerator also meant the rapid accumulation of waste bulks that were



**Fig. 4** Incinerator built in the municipality of Acerra and accumulation of waste bulks. From left to right, the incinerator in Acerra; examples of waste bulks (eco-balle) accumulated in sites confiscated from farmers. Source: courtesy of an anonymous activist



known to be toxic and dangerous for public health. In 2004, a publication in the *Lancet Oncology* journal indicated the presence of a disproportionate risk of cancer in the LoF area. In parallel, mounting evidence of the wrongdoing of the Camorra organizations was becoming visible to the wider public. The idea of considering the provinces of Naples and Caserta as a widely contaminated area was grounded in public opinion as well as in political debate. In 2006, the publication of the bestseller, *Gomorra*, by writer, journalist, and activist Roberto Saviano, brought to national and international attention the illegal nature of the waste crisis. The label ‘*Terra dei fuochi—Land of Fires*’ was in fact used by Saviano (2007) to describe the diffuse presence of illegal dumping and burning. Between 2004 and 2008, citizens and social movement activists started a more open contestation, with the emergence of clashes between activists and the state, including riots at landfill sites. Violent repression of citizens’ protests took place on various occasions in various sites throughout this period, and in 2008 violent clashes exploded in Chiaiano and Pianura, with citizens protesting against the re-opening of landfill sites (Fig. 5). Despite the increased struggles between local citizens, activists and the state, farmers did not mobilize against the waste crisis, nor did they protest against the impact of the LoF more generally.

#### **Theme 4: waste disconnecting farmers from their place**

Against all evidence, at the end of 2008, the Prime Minister declared that the waste management crisis was over, issuing the Decree 90/2008. This act indicated the end of the emergency and the establishment of a legal framework which considered landfill sites and incinerators sites of national interest. This legitimized military intervention

to combat any form of protest. Furthermore, the decree established the opening of 10 new landfills and the building of four new incinerators in Campania, again ordering military monitoring of waste facilities (D’Alisa et al. 2010). Despite the evidence of the Camorra wrongdoing, in this stage the evidently unsolved waste crisis seemed to be attributed only to the state’s incapacity to manage the waste collection problems. This is also the stage when the waste crisis started to socially identify both farmers and non-farmers. Particularly, farmers report a condition of oppression and antagonism by the state, NGOs, and almost all other social actors in this area. This is strongly associated with the attempt of the state to identify new landfill sites and to confiscate farmland to tackle the crisis:

When there was the waste collection emergency in Naples, a landfill site was identified between San Tammaro and Ferrandelle, on confiscated land. With about a hundred farmers, we tried to prevent this site from being used as landfill. In half an hour, 350 policemen with truncheons and cars forced us to run away. Some people were reported, others beaten, and the site was eventually used. This is a site that created pollution problems, it wasn’t done by us. We tried not to have it there. It was the State that wanted it. [Farmer interview #3]

Eventually, farmers started to disengage from protesting, to point out that politicians, journalists, and social activists were responsible for manipulating the crisis at the expense of farmers and farming communities. The prolonged struggles experienced by farmers appear to be critical to understand how they positioned themselves against the crisis, and in comparison, to other social actors, as indicated by this quote from a farmer we interviewed:

**Fig. 5** Clashes between the police and protesters due to the re-opening of a landfill site. Source: courtesy of Marco Nonno, author of ‘Pianura 2008—I Giorni della Monnezza’



Criminal organizations [Camorra] are not the ones against farmers. It is journalism, the TV or those who have an interest in selling produce from other areas to the detriment of our produce. [Farmer interview #1]

For some farmers, apparently, the social and political concerns about deteriorating public health, supported by local associations and environmental activists, seemed to be amplified at the expense of their own socio-economic struggles. Particularly, the trade-off between public health conditions and food quality and safety emerged as a key challenge. A collective sense of ‘victimization’ also emerged, as reported in this farmer’s statement:

The Land of Fires has been an invention of the political system. My dairy farm is in the municipality of Giugliano, in the red zone (an area designated to be highly contaminated). The Local Health Agency (ASL) and the Animal Health Institute have carried out controls on the milk, water, feed, hay and silage, and the results have always been negative. [...] Therefore, for me, the Land of Fires has never existed in this zone [Farmer interview #6]

Despite several attempts to control the emergency, and the opening of the first incinerator in Acerra in 2009 (Fig. 4), a new state of emergency was declared in 2010, when waste collection was discontinued in the City of Naples, due to the saturation of landfill sites.

The need to identify new sites re-emerged in the public debate, fuelling new protests in the municipalities listed as suitable places. Several organizations formed a wider alliance to combat the oppressive dynamics of the state.

In several municipalities in Campania, collective forms of protests were embedded in diverse networks of activists and socio-political platforms and local grassroots organizations (Falcone and De Rosa 2020). From these platforms, the ‘Stop the Biocide’ movement emerged to claim environmental justice for all citizens in Campania and fight against the authoritative approach of the CWE and the state (Figs. 5, 6).

### Theme 5: waste-based relations of (market)place

In 2013 a new stage of the crisis emerged, this time impacting farming communities more directly. During a public interview, Carmine Schiavone, the former head of one of the Camorra families, declared that practices of illegally disposing toxic waste in farmlands were more extensive than the public authorities had thought or NGOs had been able to denounce. The ‘perfect storm’ for farmers began, due to concerns related to the safety of food production from this area. Consumers started to avoid (boycott) buying food produced around Naples and Caserta, and soon this spread to any food product from the Campania region. Consequently, several retailers discontinued contracts with wholesalers and farmers’ associations. The *label* ‘Land of Fires’ became associated with all food products from this region. Suddenly, many farmers were confronted with the prospect of economic bankruptcy, being unable to commercialize their products. This time, farmers’ representatives guided an active form of protest and lobbied both national and regional authorities to fix the crisis and deploy economic compensation. A series of actions took place to establish a traceability and food quality system (‘QR Code Campania SiCura’). The deployment of



**Fig. 6** Protesters of the ‘Stop the Biocide’ movement. Source: courtesy of an anonymous activist



**Fig. 7** Traceability QR code Campania SiCura campaign. On the left, the former President of Campania Region presents the QR CODE Campania SiCura campaign; on the right, an example of the QR Code campaign inviting farmers to join. Source: Presentazione progetto QR CODE—Campania Sicura—Web TV—Regione Campania; qrcodecampania.it



these traceability systems, lobbying from farmers’ unions, and policymakers managed to contain the crisis, divert it into a problem of waste management, and progressively decouple it from safety and quality issues related to agri-food production in the Campania region (Fig. 7).

A sense of disconnection from other forms of protest increased during the latter part of the crisis (2013–2015). During this period, and despite the support received in the QR code campaign, farmers emphasized their scepticism towards any state intervention and distanced themselves from the Stop the Biocide movement. Instead, they proposed alternative solutions to limit reputational damage on agricultural products with an increased reluctance to engage with other actors:

In this area there is nothing wrong. Absolutely no toxicity! We can guarantee it 100% because analyses have been carried out on the soils, water, and on tomatoes. My produce is sent as far as Milan and it has been controlled, tomato by tomato. [Farmer interview #3]

In my opinion the term Land of Fires is a little heavy-handed because there are some areas affected by the phenomenon but not all areas [in the province] have been hit by these fires and toxicity issues. So, there are also areas that don’t have these problems. [Farmer interview #2]

This sense of denial and minimization was associated with the increased challenge to keep farm operations running, particularly due to reputational damage, with consumers still avoiding the purchase of agricultural products from Campania. In this period, farmers were confronted with the most severe of the market crises, with limitations on commercializing agricultural products, still coupled with severe disruptions to contractual relations in the supply chain. On several occasions, farmers had to destroy or get rid of their products without any economic compensation. Food produce from the Campania region was all labelled as originating from the ‘Land of Fires’, as a negative place of origin, indicating illegal, unsafe, and

ecologically contaminated products. Until then, the ‘place of origin’ and regionally based certifications and labels (e.g. the Protected Denomination of Origin—PDO) had been the primary quality signal for consumers for several food products from this region (e.g. the buffalo mozzarella cheese). Now, the waste crisis had created a need for ‘dis-embedding’ the place of production from the product quality. Thus, ‘dis-placing’ agricultural products had become the only way farmers had to overcome their diffused precarity in the socio-ecological crisis:

I have taken over a farm in Capua and bought land between S. Maria la Fossa and Grazzanise, in an area far away from here, not because of the TdF phenomenon but because of the presence of landfill sites. It is the presence of landfills that creates reputational problems. [Farmer interview #4]

However, in an intensively commodified economy, removing the ‘place’ from the products resulted in a ‘loss of place’ for their producers. For farmers, hiding the ‘place of origin’ of their produce, minimizing or denying the severity of the crisis and its relationship with diffused illegality became the only opportunity they had to cope with social stigma and ask for economic compensation and support to market their products:

We should distinguish between problems of sales we have due to product safety, due to their origin in the Land of Fires, and problems linked to illegality. The problems that I had were caused by its place of origin, which is why, to be able to sell my produce, I had to hide where it come from [Farmer interview #3]

Farmers have been forced by public authorities, the state they had blamed as the main cause of the crisis, to recognize their new precarious status, as victims of the Land of Fires crisis, still without fully recognizing the crisis, or the illegal practices and the wrongdoing of the Camorra. As such, any attempt to organize farming communities around ‘anti-Mafia’ campaigns remained limited, while animosity increased between farmers, NGOs, and political activists:

I appreciate groups trying to support the commercialization of produce in this area...but for goodness’ sake, without adding “Free from Camorra”! Why use it? The Camorra is not present at Casapesenna, it is not present at Casale, it’s elsewhere but nowhere! Why do we have to market goods under this name when we want to sell our products? Nonsense!”. [Farmer interview 2]

The result, in our view, is the emergence of a diffused sense of ‘lost place’ for many farmers and farming communities in this area. In a world dominated by market relations, farmers had to ‘lose their place’ to find a ‘marketplace’. In Table 2, we summarize our findings while

we reflect on their wider conceptual implications in the section that follows.

## Conceptualizing place-making relations in contexts of environmental crime

In this section, we engage with our findings to conceptualize place-making relations in contexts of violence and environmental crime. These are contexts where place is made or shaped through relations of dispossession, exploitation, silencing, and extreme precarity (Vaccaro and Palazzo 2015; Böhm and Pascucci 2020; Hultin et al. 2021). We recognize these contexts as places of conflictual transitions, in which understanding how different actors define and negotiate their place-frames based on processes of contestation, opposition, and marginalization is key. As discussed in “[Conceptual background](#)” section, to conceptualize these place-based dynamics, we draw from, and contribute to, two strands of literature: on one hand, we engage with Pierce et al.’s (2011) conceptualization of how places are relationally constituted and ‘the contested politics that emerge in response to attempts to transform them’ (Murphy 2015, p. 84); on the other hand, we take from Horlings et al.’s (2020) focus on responses to structural conditions, through the lenses of place-shaping. In our view, the complementarities between these two perspectives are key to understanding ‘transitions’ in places shaped by environmental crimes and the related violence, exploitation, and conditions of extreme precarity. Based on this background, we present our conceptualization following the chronological narratives we have identified in our analysis (see Fig. 2). We first present and discuss the overarching process of place-making dynamics we have observed and analysed. We then move to the discussion and conceptualization of more fine-grained dimensions of the process, starting from the triggers for waste-based place-making relations. We then focus on how waste changes place-based relations, and finally we discuss the emerging waste-based relations and their differentiation.

### Farmers’ collective place-making in contexts of violence and environmental crimes

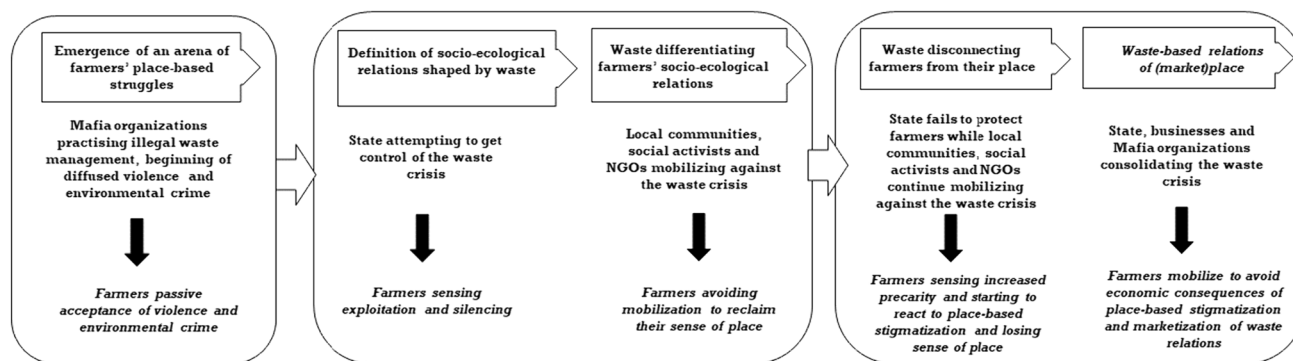
Our research questions revolve around the need to better understand farmers’ place-making and shaping in contexts of violence and environmental crimes. Particularly, we aimed at explaining, through the empirical investigation and analysis of the Land of Fires case, the emergence of patterns of differentiated responses to socio-ecological crises, shaping processes of place-framing and collective sense-making relevant for farming communities. More generally, our study aimed at better understanding sustainability transitions in relation to structural conditions (e.g. organized crime/



**Table 2** Place-making processes in the contexts of violence and environmental crime

Place-frame (theme)	Structural conditions/conflicts	Agents of place-making	Farmers' position in the place-making process	Description
Theme 1: emergence of an arena of farmers' place-based struggles	Social and environmental injustice (crime)	Camorra	Farmers' passive acceptance of violence and environmental crime	Farmers need <i>repositioning</i> towards the Camorra considering use of farmlands as illegal dumping sites. In the absence of state control over violence and environmental crime, farmers develop a passive acceptance place-frame as well as other social actors/local communities
Theme 2: definition of socio-ecological relations shaped by waste	Social and environmental injustice	State	Farmers sensing exploitation and silencing	Farmers affected by the waste crisis and illegal dumping continue their passive acceptance, sensing a marginalized role in the state response to the crisis, and the environmental crimes. A process of <i>re-appreciation</i> of their territory begins
Theme 3: waste differentiating farmers' socio-ecological relations	Social and environmental injustice	State Local activists	Farmers avoiding mobilization to reclaim their sense of place	Waste-based relations shaping social dynamics towards further marginalization of farmers from social and political discourses and actions. Farmers <i>repositioning</i> against social actors and NGOs and differentiating their collective sense of place and related identity
Theme 4: waste disconnecting farmers from their place	Social and economic injustice	State Private business Local activists	Farmers sensing increased precarity and starting to react to place-based stigmatization and losing sense of place	Farmers increasingly concerned by loss of their sense of place and identity, increasing social stigma and exploitation of resources by other actors. Farmers continue to <i>reposition</i> themselves in the socio-ecological crisis and <i>re-appreciate</i> the value of the territory in relation to their business activities, shaping a distinct sense of place compared to other social actors
Theme 5: waste-based relations of (market)place	Economic injustice	State Private businesses	Farmers mobilize to avoid economic consequences of place-based stigmatization and marketization of waste relations	Farmers enact forms of <i>re-grounding</i> to re-establish market-based relations and to avoid social stigma and economic marginalization from consumers and other businesses. Farmers also <i>reposition</i> themselves towards a more active political mobilization, targeting economic and political actors to support market-based practices to commercialize their products and receive economic compensation

### CHANGE OF COLLECTIVE SENSE OF PLACE



**Fig. 8** Conceptualizing place-making in the context of violence and environmental crime

violence) and localized responses from social and economic actors (e.g. farmers). In this section, we present and discuss the overarching process informing how farmers develop place-frames shaped by relations and activities connected to waste, in the form of illegal waste disposal and burning, occupation of farmlands by incinerators and landfill sites, farmers' marginalization in political discourses, and the stigmatization of farmers and their products. As we have evidenced in our findings, waste and its 'management' have become the pivotal aspect of collective processes that have changed, profoundly, how different actors sense and frame their place. Following Pierce et al. (2011), we position conflicts around and about waste management as the key trigger that initiated the collective processes we have analysed. Moreover, and in line with previous work, and namely the approach suggested by Horlings et al. (2020), we distinguish between actors and relations stemming from structural conditions, in this case of organized violence and environmental crimes, and local agencies, namely farmers and local communities. We then reconstruct their patterns of differentiated responses, thus enabling us to finally tackle the question of identifying the key social, political, and economic conditions leading to this differentiation. As reported in Fig. 8, the initial collective place-frame defines farmlands as the places used by private businesses and the Camorra for illegal dumping sites. In the absence of state control over violence and environmental crime, farmers develop a place-frame of passive acceptance of these practices, similarly to other social actors/local communities. This also defines a process of repositioning between the Camorra and these communities.

However, with the crisis becoming recognized by the state and public authorities, farmers' collective place-frame

shifted more decisively around waste-based relations. In this stage, in fact, farmlands became the place to locate new infrastructures to address the waste collection crisis, and particularly to stock the waste bulks, adding to the ongoing illegal waste dumping and burning practices perpetrated by the Camorra and private businesses. In this stage, farmers affected by the waste crisis started a process of re-appreciation of their territory, leading to the continuation of a passive acceptance of environmental crime, exploitation of their land, and socio-economic marginalization. With the intensification of the crisis, and the further expansion of the infrastructure to manage waste bulks and the incinerators, we observe the delineation of the differentiated responses between farmers and farming communities and social activists, NGOs, and local communities. Waste-based relations shape social dynamics towards further marginalization of farmers from social and political discourses and actions. Farmers reposition against social actors and NGOs and differentiate their collective sense of place and related identity. This passive acceptance of the socio-ecological crisis defined by the expanding waste economy is interrupted by the emergence of the market crisis and subsequent mobilization of farmers, both politically and socially. The collective sense of stigma attached to the place of origin of their products stimulated a dramatic process of repositioning and re-appreciation, triggering collective disconnection from their territory. Farmers are in fact increasingly concerned by the loss of their sense of place and identity, increasing social stigma and exploitation of resources by other actors. The final place-frame we have identified emerges by a process of re-grounding with the necessity for farmers to change their sense of place and to give to it new meanings and values. This defines the conditions to re-establish market-based relations and to

avoid social stigma and economic marginalization from consumers and other businesses. Farmers also reposition themselves towards a more active political mobilization, targeting economic and political actors to support market-based practices to commercialize their products and receive economic compensation. In the next section, we reflect on the key conceptual outcomes of this process and how we can extend them to other place-based relations.

### **Triggers for changing place-making relations: waste-based relations shape place-specific conflicts**

In line with the relational place-making framework, we derive the relevance of waste-based relations in shaping *place-specific conflicts* in the socio-ecological crisis of the Land of Fires. Waste defines the key socio-spatial and political processes in this context and determines which place-based changes should be negotiated, opposed, and potentially resolved, and by whom (Murphy 2015). Like the idea of a networked place, The Land of Fires becomes over time a place made by the entanglement or bundling of different, and divergent, collective, multi-actor, and multi-dimensional relations (see Table 2). The state, the Camorra, social movement activists, NGOs, and local citizens are entangled with farmers' narratives and practices of passive acceptance first, and then mobilization, embedding farmers' place-making in what Massey (2004) would have defined as a particular time–space trajectory: a continued struggle in which *materials* (e.g. waste, land, crops), *meanings* (dirt, denial, blame, pride), *experiences* (protest, passive acceptance, illegal waste dumping), *spaces* (farmland, landfills, incinerators), and *people* (farmers, activists, politicians, mafioso) are framed around waste management and related practices. In other words, farmers become entangled (or embedded) in a geography of conflictual waste-based relations (Table 2).

### **Change of place-making relations (1): in waste-based relations farmers are place-taker not maker**

Looking at the relational place-making that occurred in the Land of Fires over time, farmers often appear to be taking meanings and frames related to their place, rather than collectively engaging in shaping their place-based identities and positionalities. For example, in their prolonged passive acceptance, they tend to avoid mobilizing against collective place-frames created by other actors, such as the Camorra, social movements, local communities, political actors, or the state. Since the construction of “place-frames” serves as a strategic device to advance social and political objectives (Martin 2003; Murphy 2015), their passive acceptance of waste-based relations indicates their marginalization in

relevant economic and political networks, dominated by actors promoting a political agenda in which rural and peri-urban farming communities are excluded. This is in line with Pierce et al.'s (2011) conceptualization in which the analysis of how relationships and positionalities are mobilized in competing place-frames can be used to identify and distil the key conflicts that affect place-based changes (or transitions).

### **Change of place-making relations (2): in waste-based relations, farmers become place-makers when repositioning and re-grounding**

However, farmers not only passively accepted waste-based relations and, despite their marginalization, collectively managed to create a place-based response to the waste crisis. Here, we draw on the notion of place-shaping more decisively, since in our view, their mobilization defines a response to structural processes (Horlings et al. 2020). Their mobilization in relation to social stigma and market boycott should be considered as a place-based process, as they attempt to preserve their identity and very existence, or to protect what is left of their sense of community. Using Horlings and colleagues' (2020) approach, this is a process of *repositioning* for farmers against alienation, expropriation, unfair appropriation of resources, or political silencing imposed by the unfolding waste-based relations (Harvey 2005; Murphy 2015). In parallel, a process of collective *re-grounding* has characterized farmers' response in their attempt to dis-embed their productions from their 'origin', in contrast to the historical and cultural identification of many products with their place of origin, and as a way of creating market-based relations and values. Collective re-grounding entailed the use of novel practices to create value and identity for their products, for example by adopting monitoring and certification systems that would re-establish market-based relationships with consumers. This process has defined the emergence of a new sense of place, in which farmers had to 'dis-place' their products, and eventually themselves, to adapt to the mounting structural conditions of diffused violence imposed as much by the state as by the Camorra. This form of 'dis-placement' appears as a necessary response to make it possible for their products to access markets and as a mechanism to protect their livelihoods. In other words, farmers had to fully dis-connect their products from their place, through market-based relations and commodification practices (e.g. using practices of food quality control and traceability). In their mobilization, farmers have not lost their homes, their properties, or farmlands, in the strict sense of being forced to physically leave them behind, as refugees would do, but

they have been equally displaced from their very social and ecological identities.

### **Emergence of differentiated relations of displacement: farmers collectively constructed differentiated responses to waste-based socio-ecological struggles**

Finally, our findings have indicated that farmers have not only mobilized, but also differentiated their responses to the waste crisis and the related diffused violence and environmental crime over time. While in general they have struggled to mobilize collectively, with only fragmented and small groups of farmers protesting against the practice of illegal burning or dumping, they have instead managed to react to place-based stigmatization, particularly towards the final and more intense stages of the waste crisis. In our view, this confirms the presence of a pattern of differentiated responses to socio-ecological struggles and conflicts, in which farmers, as local agency, have become initially ‘passive’ to the structural pressures instilled by organized violence and environmental crime, but more ‘active’ in reaction to pressures from the state, local activists, and market dynamics. Moreover, and despite the difference in responses, being of resistance or acceptance, farmers in this area have positioned themselves against the waste crisis by questioning their place-based identity, and in fact, we claim, losing their place-based collective identity.

## **Conclusions**

This study tries to shed light on how conditions of violence and environmental crime have informed farmers’ relational place-making. We have focused on conflicts and the spatially and temporally differentiated response of farmers to the waste crisis, the entanglement between these responses with the state, and the ubiquitous violence and crimes perpetrated by the Camorra. Arguably, farmers’ mobilization has become visible predominantly in relation to mechanisms of commodification of their produce. The presence of selected responses to the waste crisis, between farmers and farming communities, and in the different stages of the crisis, has proven of particular interest for our theorizing. Consistent with the extant literature, the responses to the structural pressures instilled by organized violence and environmental crime, as well as the state and other business actors, tend to confirm social and spatial differentiation among concerned local actors. What emerges from our study, in fact, is a process in which several farmers in this region had to reposition and regroup their relations, particularly when connected to their material conditions, for example due to instances of decoupling place of origin from their products

to commercialize them and maintain some level of income, and protect their livelihoods (see Fig. 8). What the Land of Fires context seems to indicate is the emergence of a wider process of ‘silencing and neglect’, in which the collective sense of place for farmers and farming communities has been progressively eroded. We found that these conditions inform *relational place-making* triggered by diffused violence, where farmers’ place-based relations are defined by a geography of ‘extreme precarity’. We believe that our study further expands the extant literature in at least two ways. First, we acknowledge more explicitly the role of violence and environmental crimes, and the related extreme precarity, to shape farmers’ place-based conditions. Particularly, we add to the extant literature the role of violence, exploitation, and silencing as key to understanding how social actors, like farmers, collectively create, take, make, or shape their place-frames. Second, our analysis refines our understanding of how social actors shape spatial–temporal relations in the context of conflicts marked by violence and extreme precarity (Vaccaro and Palazzo 2015; Cavotta et al. 2021). From this perspective, our study contributes to existing knowledge aimed at unpacking relational place-making in contexts of socio-ecological crises, enriching the extant literature on environmental justice, and for example engaging with the notion of ecological distribution conflicts to explain contentious human–nature relations in contexts of extractivism (Ehrnström-Fuentes 2022; Ehrnström-Fuentes and Böhm 2023), illegal waste, and dumping (Scheidel et al. 2018, 2020).

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## **Declarations**

**Conflict of interest** All authors involved in this research declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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