

Reinforcing protective structures against labor exploitation of seasonal workers. Social innovation research in South Tyrol

Franca Zadra ^{*} , Susanne Elsen

Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Faculty of Education, Area of Social Sciences, Viale Ratsibona 16, 39042, Bressanone, BZ, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Labor exploitation
Seasonal workers
Social innovation
Prevention
Networks
Migration
Italian agriculture

ABSTRACT

This case study offers insights into the fragile position of seasonal workers, who occupy the most precarious roles in the production chain, even in advanced and prosperous agricultural systems, such as in the autonomous province of South Tyrol, the focus of this study. Social innovation research approaches in this case functioned as a catalyst of social change (Moulaert et al., 2017) by connecting and activating local stakeholders around labor exploitation prevention. The action research project FARm involved stakeholders from major public, private, and third-sector organizations related to agricultural labor, in four territories of Northern Italy with the goal of strengthening preventive measures against labor exploitation. Among protective factors, this case study shows that small farms embedded in rural communities appear protective against labor exploitation. Their survival is facilitated by generous public investment and collaborative structures. However, cross-border seasonal workers still face challenges of geographic, social, cultural and linguistic isolation, that enhances the risk of exploitative conditions being undetected, also due to inaccessibility of reporting channels and transnational recruitment processes. Moreover, the short length of stay and the widespread informality in labor relations result in undeclared or partially declared work, which reduces employer accountability. Social innovation research approaches facilitated dialogue between organizations with different interests, which resulted in a joint declaration of intent, and in implemented synergic strategies to reinforce labor exploitation prevention.

1. Introduction

This case study offers insights into the fragile position of seasonal workers, who occupy the most precarious roles in the production chain, even in advanced and prosperous agricultural systems, such as in the autonomous province of South Tyrol, the focus of this study. It also sheds light on the potential of social innovation research as a catalyst of social change (Moulaert et al., 2017) by connecting and activating local stakeholders to prevent labor exploitation.

In Italy, the number of foreign citizens among agricultural workers has quadrupled in the first 15 years of the 2000s, as documented by CREA: from 100,000 to more than 400,000, only a small fraction of whom are employed all year-round (CREA, 2021, p. 17–19). Labor exploitation in Italian agriculture is widespread (OPR, 2023). This study focuses on social innovation research conducted with stakeholders in South Tyrol, in the context of project FARm, co-financed by the Italian Government and by the European Union through the FAMI Fund, between 2020 and 2022. Led by four Universities in four different

territories of Northern Italy (the Regions of Veneto and Lombardia, and the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano), FARm involved a large number of partners, public, private and non-profit, creating collaborative connections with the objective of preventing and redressing labor exploitation in agriculture. The project covered four different territories in Northern Italy: the Veneto and Lombardia regions, which have been strongly affected by labor exploitation in agriculture, and the Autonomous Provinces of Trentino and Alto Adige (South Tyrol) in which such cases rarely emerge. The project adopted a preventive approach, generating significant knowledge-sharing across topics and territories, grounding local experiences in a broader, supra-local perspective. The case study (Yin, 2018) draws on experiences and data gathered from major stakeholders in different positions related to agriculture in the province. The objective was to generate reflection on the issue, previously unaddressed, and to involve local stakeholders in developing prevention strategies, such as effective pathways to report cases.

The Autonomous Province of Bozen-Bolzano, also known as South

This article is part of a special issue entitled: Rural-urban interfaces published in Journal of Rural Studies.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Franca.Zadra@unibz.it (F. Zadra), Susanne.Elsen@unibz.it (S. Elsen).

Tyrol (Fig. 1), is the northernmost province in Italy, situated at the Austrian border. It is a mountainous region, renowned for its apple production, and high-quality wine. Dairy farming is also significant, with permanent meadows and pastures comprising 78.4% of the 204,085 ha of utilized agricultural land.¹ High public investment in agriculture in this province stems from the cultural and political history of the territory. Annexed to Italy after World War I, the province has since acquired a high degree of legislative, administrative, and fiscal autonomy. It is a multilingual environment, where the German-speaking population constitutes approximately 70% of the total population, predominantly in rural and agricultural areas, while urban centers are more culturally diverse. The Südtiroler Volkspartei, the dominant political party since 1948, represents the interests of the German-speaking group. Most agricultural land belongs to this group, which forms the party's key electoral base and benefits from significant political power (Benedikter, 2017). This demographic, economic, and political context explains why small farms have survived the national decline, supported by governmental protections.

In contrast to neighboring regions, relatively few criminal cases of severe labor exploitation in South Tyrolean agriculture have been brought to the justice system to date.² Therefore, the analysis in this province focused on strengthening preventive structures. The project helped raise awareness of this issue, which is endemic in neighboring regions. Initially, it challenged the perception of hard-working, German-speaking, traditional mountain families, raising defensive attitudes among producers. The provincial agriculture alderman argued that the exploitation of seasonal workers would be inadmissible and shameful, particularly considering the generous financial aid provided to local farmers (agricultural alderman, February 11, 2020). This sentiment, among other factors, contributed to keeping producers engaged in the conversation throughout the project.

The questions that drive this case study focus on labor exploitation prevention: How is labor exploitation being prevented in South Tyrolean agriculture and how to reinforce such prevention? Which protective factors and risk factors can we identify in this context? Which key stakeholders can be mobilized to contribute to the preventive structures against labor exploitation in agriculture?

How can a social innovation research approach contribute to our understanding of such mobilization?

After a literature review that allows to delineate the issue of labor exploitation in agriculture, which affects disproportionately workers of foreign origin and cross-border temporary laborers, a methodological section details the actions taken, the stakeholders who participated, the methods of data collection and analysis, and the limitations of this study. Outcomes are presented in two sections. In the first section, contextual information is provided about the agricultural context in South Tyrol and the factors that were identified by stakeholders and researchers as preventive against the risk of labor exploitation of seasonal workers. In the second section, we present the risk factors that were identified by the same partnership network as potential for growth, as well as the preventive actions that were identified (and in some cases immediately enacted) to limit those risks. A conclusion synthesizes major findings and briefly reflects on the potential of social innovation research to involve stakeholders positioned in very different milieus to create

¹ All hard data on South Tyrolean population comes from the permanent ASTAT census: <https://astat.provincia.bz.it/it/censimento-continuo-popolazione-abitazioni-2023.asp>, while on agriculture data comes from the latest ten-year agricultural census of 2020, delayed to the next year due to the Pandemic: <https://astat.provincia.bz.it/it/7-censimento-generale-agricoltura.asp>.

² Three cases, against the more than 50 in Veneto and more than 100 in Lombardia, albeit larger and more articulated territories, according to the Observatory of juridical cases mapped by ADIR <https://www.adir.unifi.it/laboratorio/tabella.htm#BOLZANO>.

collaborative knowledge, resources, and interventions, generating more robust and impactful knowledge (Nowotny, 2003).

2. Preventing labor exploitation of seasonal agricultural workers

According to the latest IOM Migration Report (2022, p. 36), on a global scale, roughly two-thirds of international migrants (272 million) are migrant workers (169 million). And specifically in agriculture, EUROSTAT shows that in 2020, approximately 6.3 million people were employed in agriculture in the EU-27, with around 1.2 million coming from outside the EU. (Eurostat, Employment in Agriculture, 2020). Moreover, in 2019, approximately 40% of migrant workers in agriculture were employed on a temporary or seasonal basis, with a higher share observed in southern European countries such as Spain and Italy (Eurostat, Employment by Contract Type, 2019). Despite their significant contribution, migrant workers in Europe face high labor market access barriers, especially women, who are particularly at risk of multidimensional disadvantages (Calafà, 2021). They experience higher unemployment rates than native-born women and are often relegated to low-skilled employment (IOM 2022, p. 97–98), such as domestic labor or fruit picking.

In a study on Southern Italy, Corrado explains how agricultural labor has transitioned from being a family-based workforce to a hired, externalized labor force, as well as from local to foreign-origin workers. This transition followed the migration of local populations from rural to urban areas. In rural areas, newly arrived migrants have easier access to job opportunities, both formal and informal, as well as basic necessities. However, these conditions, the different legal statuses of migrant workers in areas of little visibility can foster irregular or illegal labor arrangements, and severe exploitation, as it was well documented in Southern Italy (Corrado, 2018, p. 2). Migrants are disproportionately represented in the temporary, unskilled, and precarious agricultural positions in Italy. The fifth report of the Placido Rizzotto Observatory estimates that 230,000 workers are exposed to grave exploitation in Italian agriculture (OPR, 2023), an increase from the 180,000 estimated in the 2019 report.

A recent policy framework on combating labor exploitation in agriculture by the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLPS, 2020) synthesizes the ILO framework, as well as European and Italian legislation, and defines labor exploitation as: a. illicit or misleading intermediation, and/or b. work conditions that do not correspond to the legal minimums defined by law and by current collective contracts in terms of hours, wages, safety and health, social security and dignified treatment, and/or c. precarious and undignified living conditions. When coercion or exploitation of a state of necessity occurs, labor exploitation escalates into forced labor. The European Union Fundamental Rights Agency has clarified the various forms and levels of exploitation (Fig. 2).

This juridical stratification of labor exploitation (Fig. 2) overcomes the binary between free and forced labor. In fact, the complexity of exploitation has brought scholars in this field to speak about a *continuum of precarity*, expressed in forms of *unfree labor* (Yea, 2017; Strauss and McGrath, 2017) that may not coincide with juridical indicators, and need to be understood from their structural causes. Labor exploitation in agriculture, particularly of cross-border seasonal workers, is a key element in the agriculture-migration nexus (King et al., 2021) and has demonstrated to be an impactful factor in urban-rural relations and synergies (Uleri et al., 2023). The growing demand of cheap and temporary agricultural labor, as enterprises grow in size and production intensity, meets the supply of desperate workers created by immigration policies that shape precarious migration trajectories and limit migrant's access to secure, qualified, and fair employment. Specifically, in Italy in the last decade, asylum seekers have mostly replaced locals in precarious and seasonal agricultural work. The mechanisms of migration policies ensure a constant influx of potential workers with little access to regular labor markets: "By tying together residence permit and employment

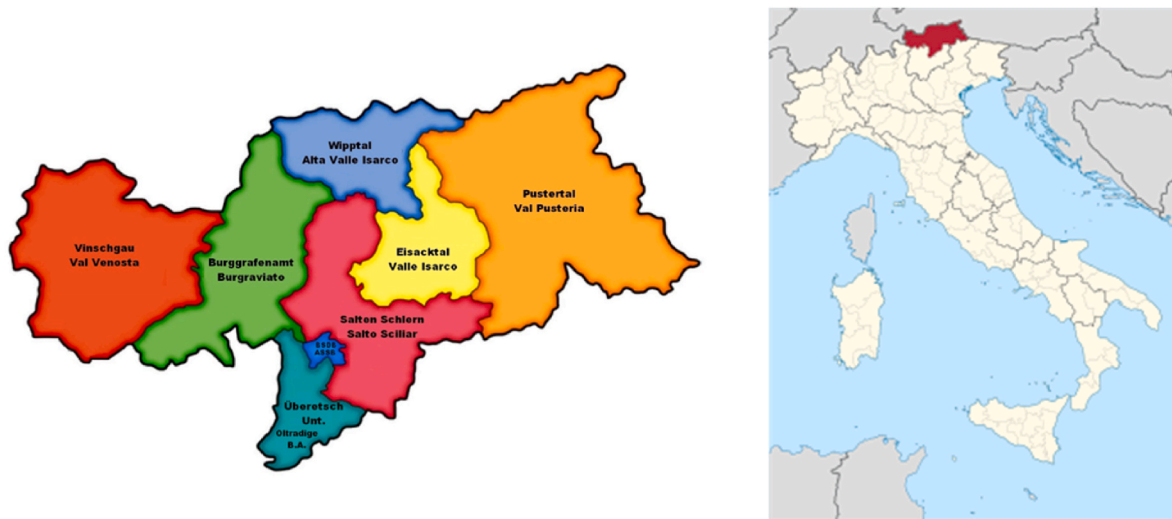


Fig. 1. Location and areas in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano (South Tyrol).

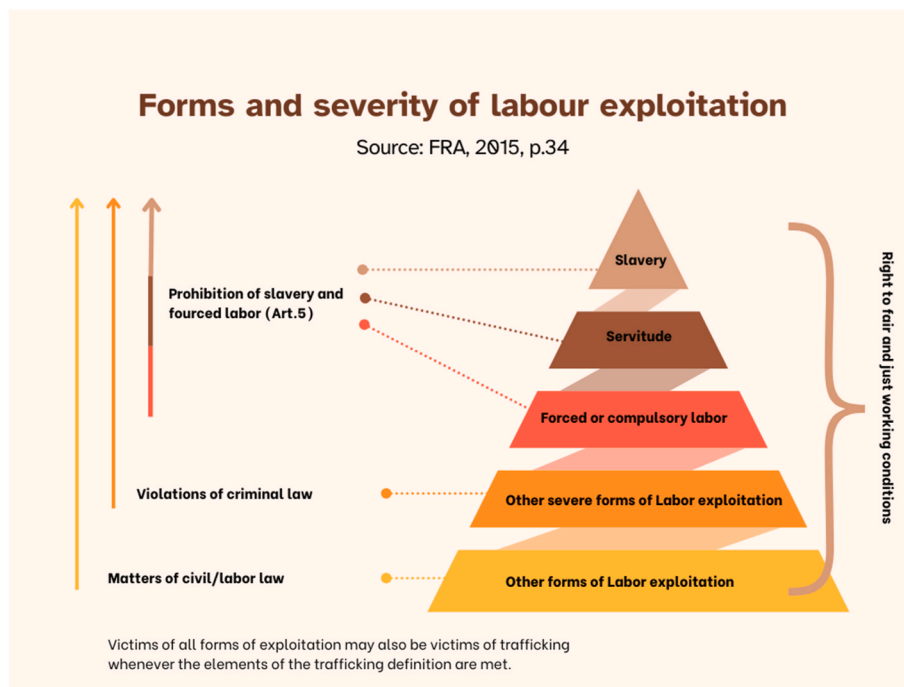


Fig. 2. Levels of labor exploitation according to FRA, 2015, p.34.

contract, Italian migration policies and the strictures of the asylum system make immigrants more vulnerable to super-exploitation and unfree labor, enhancing the deregulation of the labor market” (Pradella and Cillo, 2021, p.484). Literature shows that lack of job security and lack of union awareness significantly reduce *labor agency*, defined as “the worker’s ability to act and improve their conditions”, identifying institutional constraints which decrease such agency: “weak employment protection, vulnerability of migrant workers, limited workers’ representation and insufficient labor law enforcement” (Gansemans & D’Haese 2020, p.397).

Another structural aspect regards labor intermediation channels, which are increasingly externalized, transnational, and harder to scrutinize. Failures of public recruitment systems in Italy are particularly acute in agriculture, which relies on the intermittent procurement of short-term workers, that the illicit brokerage of the *caporalato* system can provide (Perrotta, 2015; Perrotta and Raeymaekers, 2023; Palumbo

et al. 2022; Omizzolo, 2018). These exploitative arrangements are also influenced by pressures of prize control from large distributors on agricultural enterprises, driven by global competition.

Among the forms of temporary agricultural work, cross-border seasonal workers have greater risk of being subjected to labor exploitation due to their lack of structural protections, their temporary presence in the country of employment, and their frequent spatial and linguistic isolation (Hedberg, 2021; Bruzelius and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2023). This isolation may determine serious difficulties to be reached by labor union and social services outreach programs, which, wherever available, may bridge between isolated workers and public services (Zadra and Elsen, 2022). These conditions undermine the resilience of migrants, and their social marginalization questions the narratives of local elites who depict current labor arrangements with ‘guest’ workers as a win-win situation (Rye, 2018). Milbourne and Coulson (2021) observe that “migrant labour occupies a rather ambiguous position within the UK’s agri-food

system: its presence has been normalized, perhaps even institutionalized, by dominant actors, but the unpleasant realities of migrant work and the voices of migrants themselves remain conveniently absent from mainstream agri-food narratives” (p.438).

During Covid-19 pandemic, despite governments’ facilitating measures for hiring locals, the mobility of migrant seasonal workers in European agriculture continued, and their rights failed to be protected (Palumbo et al., 2022). Studies document issues such as underpayment, irregular hiring practices, heightened stress, inadequate transport, difficulties with labor inspections, lack of accessible healthcare assistance, and poor housing conditions, including informal settlements and overcrowded or substandard housing (Garcés Mascareñas and Güel, 2021; Perrotta and Raeymaekers, 2023; Rye and Andrzejewska, 2010, Sexsmith, 2021). Moreover, migrant workers in agriculture are often penalized for the lack of recognition of their expertise, both formal and informal (Scott and Rye, 2021).

According to Bruzelius and Seeleib-Kaiser (2023), the erosion of labor rights of migrant seasonal workers in European agriculture is caused by the lack of enforcement mechanisms for policy, rather than for lacking policies:

“the issue at stake is not necessarily a lack of regulations and norms at the EU level, but a lack of enforcement by Member States (...) Inspections are very infrequent, the risk of labor violations being identified very low, and penalties for exploitations and underpayment often low or unlikely, irrespective of enforcement regime” (p.178-179).

However, Pereira et al. (2021) document that expectations of seasonal migrant workers in European agriculture are often frustrated because of shortcomings regarding both policy and its implementation:

“in their experience, legalization, the repayment of debts and family reunification take much longer than expected; and work, income, and housing conditions are considerably more precarious than they were told (...) In the absence of channels for documented labour migration, the migrants become vulnerable to the abuses imposed by migration networks and they tend to see it as part of the process” (p.508).

Rushemuka and Côte (2024) observe that “there is a need to shift beyond the paper formalities of legal frameworks that cater to the needs for “de-risking” supply chains for downstream firms, and towards the labour realities of [mining] workers, including the risks they incur, and ways to support them” (p.9). Protopapa (2022) calls for rethinking strategies against labor exploitation based on the needs and rights of migrant workers. After all, as Ray observes (2018), migrant workers in agriculture “are not without leverage in the local economy. Migrant labour is required for the continued growth of the local economy” (p.197). A reevaluation of their role and a collective space of responsibility and accountability for their rights beyond paper, is what this research process fostered.

The contribution of the study to the literature in this sector is twofold, regarding content and process. Firstly, studies around the precarization of migrant seasonal labor in agriculture may benefit from a case study about an Italian territory which has resisted the advance of severe exploitation cases that are ubiquitous in neighboring regions. This project aimed to verify and understand protective factors and risk factors at play, and to mobilize stakeholders in reinforcing preventive structures, protecting seasonal workers from further precarization. Thus, the second contribution points at the usefulness of social innovation to foster transdisciplinary processes of change regarding labor exploitation. Such paradigm proved useful in fostering a multilevel, multisector, multiactor dialogue on labor exploitation, thematizing the issue within the local structures and contexts, opening spaces to question existing power imbalances and hegemonic narratives, and enacting collaborative preventive interventions, as we will explain in the methodological section (See Moulart, MacCallum & Hilliard, 2013).

3. Methodology

3.1. A social innovation framework

This case study (Yin, 2018) is rooted in a social innovation research framework (Moulart et al., 2013, 2017). Social innovation is a transdisciplinary approach (Leavy, 2016; Bergmann et al., 2012), and as such is problem-centered, rather than discipline-centered. It reaches beyond academic spheres, to involve stakeholders as co-producers and partners, rather than mere informants or users of knowledge. This co-production involves defining research questions, methods, analysis, and dissemination formats, through a continuous and reflexive process of joint problematization (Cfr. Moulart and MacCallum, 2019, p.103-105). Transdisciplinary research and participatory action research are methodologies particularly well suited for research aimed at social innovation. These aim at including diverse voices in knowledge production processes, and they may be applied to a wide variety of issues, such as medical or environmental issues. Social innovation aims at generating social change, *bringing process and content dimensions together*, “analyzing development potential and development strategies, enhancing the prominence of social relations and collective actions” (Moulart and MacCallum, 2019, p.82). It applies a variety of research methods in sight of fostering a “constructive way of thinking about, analyzing and practicing human development” (p.4), for instance, through the concept of *integrated area development* (ibid, p.81-86), without striving to reach developmental peaks, but focusing on new ways to respond to the basic needs of a larger portion of the population and including previously excluded groups. Social innovation, fosters the involvement and connection of multiple sectors and multiple scales, mobilizing societal actors around social justice objectives, often with redistributive aims:

“We assert that SI is characterized by three interconnected core principles: it meets genuine needs neglected or exacerbated by the state/market apparatus; it creates new forms of eco-social/institutional relations and politics; and it collectively empowers people (especially marginalized people) to act -not only within the existent systems and modes of governance, but also towards transforming them” (ibid, p.4).

The complex social problems targeted by social innovation research often intersect with diverse social systems, each with distinct knowledge bases, priorities, and milieus. Connecting these systems and fostering collaborative knowledge, intervention, and resource development is a central priority of this framework: “it treats the dynamics of personal and social relations across scales as intrinsically important to building shared values, meeting needs and empowering communities” (ibid, p.115). It aims to generate change in societal structures through a *change in power relations between social actors*, because “system change does not ultimately work without work on interpersonal relations” (ibid, p.115).

How did [name of project] apply this framework? This case study aimed to improve labor exploitation prevention by creating opportunities for connection, knowledge co-creation, and collaborative intervention among stakeholders in agricultural labor—stakeholders who typically operate in separate spheres. It facilitated dialogue and networking across public, private, and third sector actors to strengthen preventive structures. Research partners came from very different positions (Fig. 2), and specific measures were taken to address power asymmetries and promote reciprocal learning and collaborative action through participatory data collection and joint interpretation (Fig. 3).

3.2. Diverse stakeholders as research partners

Following an initial stakeholder analysis and literature review, data was collected between 2020 and 2021, through written qualitative questionnaires to key project partners, 30 in-depth interviews, and joint interventions with stakeholders. While the project in other territories began with a wide partnership, in South Tyrol, only one project partner



Fig. 3. Distribution of interview partners by organization type.

shared the journey from the start: a coalition of third-sector organizations engaged in anti-trafficking efforts. This coalition proved instrumental in broadening the scope of participant organizations and fostering collaborative interventions. Leaders of these organizations participated in the interviews alongside researchers.

The semi-structured interviews featured sets of questions tailored to each type of institution. For instance, all labor unions shared an initial set of questions, while law enforcement agencies received a separate set. Interviews typically lasted between one and 2 h. The process began with an email invitation to organization leaders, explaining the project objectives and inviting them to participate. However, the approach varied significantly depending on the respondent, with follow-up questions and additional exchanges often emerging from initial interviews.

As detailed in Fig. 3, interview partners included.

- **Local government offices** focused on agriculture and labor, including the Alderman for Agriculture, the Deputy Director of the Agricultural Office, the Director of the Labor Inspectorate, the Vice Director of Public Employment Services, and a researcher from the Labor Market Observatory.
- **Law enforcement agencies:** senior representatives of two local law enforcement agencies.
- **Private sector employers** in agriculture: directors and representatives from the Farmers' Association, Cooperatives Organization, and Floriculture Association, as well as individual socially conscious entrepreneurs.
- **Labor unions** active in agriculture: representatives from the agriculture branch of all four labor unions in the region, as well as general directors (in one union one person held both roles).
- **Third sector organizations:** Representatives of NGOs involved in anti-trafficking and migrant reception systems.

The choice of interlocutors was designed to reduce asymmetries and foster a more balanced space of knowledge exchange between producers, who enjoy strong government support, and labor unions, who often feel disempowered in reaching cross-border seasonal workers. Including the Labor Inspectorate, law enforcement bodies, and third-sector organizations in these discussions helped mitigate positional

imbalances and centered the focus on labor rights for seasonal workers.

3.3. Co-interpretation and joint action

Like most case studies, this research involved multiple triangulation processes: between different data sources, different participants, different researchers, different theoretical lenses and levels, as well as applying varied methodologies (Yin, 2018, p.128). Opportunities to address interpretative biases emerged through recursive feedback sessions, where stakeholders reviewed results, and through the iterative dynamics between theory and practice. Researchers raised practice-oriented questions to stakeholders while remaining open to insights from field experience. The dialogue between different perspectives and between knowledge and action was continuous, as researchers were embedded in practical fieldwork, assuming varied roles (*authors' reference*). Diverse methods of data collection and analysis were applied (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 shows the process which resulted in a *joint declaration of intent*, represented in the bottom-left corner, which was centered on risk and preventive factors and practices regarding labor exploitation in South Tyrolean agriculture. It was co-created with stakeholders through a process of *joint problematization*, as described in social innovation literature (Moulaert and MacCallum, 2019, p. 103–105). Following the initial stages depicted in blue, including the literature review and the stakeholder analysis, the second stage began with the interview process, depicted in yellow. Based on interviews and emerging collaborations, researchers created a “raw context analysis”, as an initial draft for discussion, depicted in green. This analysis triangulated data using a thematic grid with MAXQDA software. Its empirical base included interview data, field notes, local agricultural work statistics, and literature reviews. Topics in the grid were adjusted as new themes emerged, employing *progressive focusing techniques* (Stake, 1995), and collaborative coding by two researchers. Comparison with neighboring agricultural systems, as facilitated by interregional project collaborations, was also instrumental in identifying South Tyrol's specific characteristics (light blue in Fig. 4). As social innovation approaches suggest, “these processes went further than simple ‘problem-solution’ definitions; they placed local issues in the context of wider-reaching exclusionary forces”

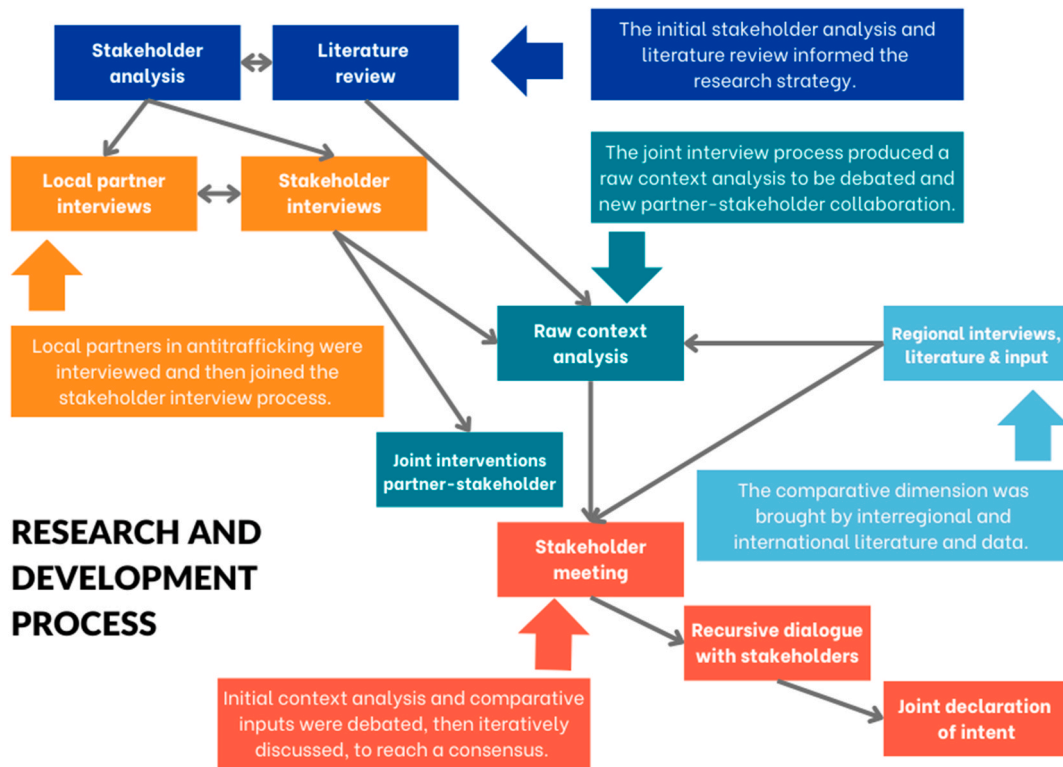


Fig. 4. Methodologies used in the research and development process with South Tyrol stakeholders.

(Moulaert & MacCallum, p.83) that had become endemic in neighboring regions and raised questions on the protective and risk factors active in the provincial context.

The draft context analysis was presented and discussed at a stakeholder debate held on university grounds, chosen as neutral territory. Equal speaking time was allotted to representatives from each stakeholder group: third-sector organizations, labor unions, producers' organizations, and government offices. Law enforcement agencies opted out, citing their mandate for neutrality. This setting shifted discussions about exploitation prevention from the adversarial context of collective contract negotiations to a more plural, knowledge-oriented space. By situating the debate beyond bilateral producer-union negotiations, the process demonstrated how exploitation prevention served shared interests and enabled productive alliances (in orange in Fig. 4). A key feature of social innovation is fostering collective responsibility and *bottom-linked governance*. Top-down solutions often fail to solve problems that policymakers only partially understand, while bottom-up solutions may lack the resources for sustainable transformation. By generating a discussion platform in which public, private and third sector actors discussed at eye-level, all were invited to contribute and be co-responsible around outcomes of the process:

"Bottom-linked governance starts from the concern that many new socially innovative initiatives are highly necessary but that their governance, as well as that of the relevant supportive as well as democratising state institutions, should be developed interactively. The image we should have of this interaction, however, is not that of an easy-going sweet romance, but a trajectory of co-construction and confrontation moments in which protest and conflict, as well as analysis, co-learning and negotiation, all have a role, as does the re-institutionalisation of relationships between state and civil society" (Moulaert and MacCallum, 2019, p.117)

The debate was not easy going, in fact, but it allowed participants to voice conflicting views while fostering mutual knowledge and understanding. Interventions by inspection bodies and third-sector actors, less

aligned with specific interest groups, softened the polarization of the discussions. The context analysis expanded the scope of labor condition negotiations beyond wages and contracts to include systemic protections. Discussions avoided topics which, by law, are left to bilateral negotiations around the collective contract, such as wages levels. The project refused to contain a human rights issue to the polarized setting of a negotiating table, where tensions between producers and labor unions are deadlocked. To promote social change and widen the discussion, new actors were essential. To resolve impasses, actors such as the labor observatory, the labor inspectorate, social organizations in the third sector and law enforcement agencies brought new cases, possibilities, and points of view. Although differences remained, the debate highlighted divergent interpretations of the local agricultural context, encouraging dialogue that continued over months. This process culminated in drafting and revising a joint declaration of intent. After multiple feedback rounds, the declaration was formally adopted during a stakeholder meeting, which because of Covid-19 restrictions was held online. The document outlined strengths, growth opportunities, and suggested measures to safeguard fair labor conditions in South Tyrolean agriculture, in those areas in which consensus could be reached. In those areas in which consensus was not reached, at least opposing positions were clarified and thematized, and this proved to be helpful to adjust expectations and to recalibrate strategies. Such diversified collaboration is difficult, as conflict may arise between different priorities and interests, but it enables more effective policies, targeted interventions, and support for self-organized initiatives.

This article offers key aspects of context analysis stated on the declaration of intent while elaborating on the process itself, and the change it brought about. During this process, researchers played a complex role which included raising questions and facilitating of joint problematization, fact-finding, maintaining dialogue between conflicting interests, connecting different knowledge milieus, as well as fostering a co-construction of interventions by sharing expertise from other territories. Every content was thoroughly discussed and modified by several stakeholders, as they collectively took ownership of the

declaration of intent. The knowledge we present in this article was discussed and co-interpreted by researchers and stakeholders together.

3.4. Limitations of the study

Firstly, we recognize the limitations of all case studies, which focus on a specific system in its context and cannot be overgeneralized. We hope to bring learning useful to other settings by fostering a deeper understanding of one context, as “a particular case that is well constructed ceases to be particular” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.77). However, a case study is interpretative, and while this one has attempted to weave together different perspectives, in the effort of creating collaborative action, it is not the only possible approach. The project, guided by social innovation methods, implied a nexus between theory and practice and significant actions towards mobilization of stakeholders. It entailed advantages related to research impact, as well as to the generation of new understandings and actions related to the issue, but also entailed limitations, such as the need to mediate the tensions between different interests, the shared ownership of the process, which made for a relative unpredictability of the pathway, among other challenges.

The Covid-19 pandemic strongly limited the implementation of research and interventions, particularly in-person exchanges. However, the most important limitation of this case study was not including agricultural workers, particularly cross-border seasonal workers, as partners in the study. Several factors made it not feasible, among which the very short stay of such workers in the territory, paired with the restrictions of the pandemic. Several of their stories were documented by third-sector organizations and labor unions, and they were reached as beneficiaries by the project’s prevention and outreach actions, but they were not involved as participating partners in the project, and the absence of their voice leaves a significant blind spot.

4. South Tyrolean agriculture: contextual and protective factors

This section presents the context of South Tyrol’s agricultural sector, highlighting elements that stakeholders identified as protective against labor exploitation.

4.1. Local government’s political and economic investments in agriculture

Contributing factors to the prosperity of agricultural enterprises in South Tyrol include significant public investment and protective legislation. The so-called “closed farmstead” law (*maso chiuso*, provincial laws 17/November 28, 2001 and 5/April 19, 2018) prevents the fragmentation of family farms by regulating inheritance to maintain land productivity. Additionally, the province provides millions of euros annually in direct financial contributions to private agricultural enterprises for infrastructure maintenance and modernization, crop protection from adverse weather and support young farmers starting out.³ Farmers also receive compensation for providing environmental services.

The local government supports farmers in accessing European financial contributions through a dedicated provincial office and operates a public professional school of agriculture. South Tyrol also benefits from national subsidies and tax exemptions targeted at mountain agriculture. Of the province’s 7400 square kilometers, only 14% lie below 1000 m above sea level, 49% between 1000 and 2000 m, and 37% above 2000 m (ASTAT, 2021). The Public Labor Service emphasizes the fiscal advantages of mountain agriculture, stating: “As a mountain province, in contrast with other territories, the social costs of labor are reduced.

³ For an overview of such investments, the annual Agricultural and Forestry Report of the Provincial Government is available in Italian and German at <https://agricoltura.provincia.bz.it/it/relazioni-agrarie-forestali>.

This is an enormous advantage because the average hourly cost employers must pay is lower than in other regions” (Public Labor Service, February 17, 2021).

Despite these favorable factors, wages of seasonal workers remain extremely low relative to the cost of living, discouraging local participation, and necessitating reliance on cross-border seasonal labor from Eastern Europe.

4.2. The survival of small farms in cooperative systems

Nationally, small farms have rapidly declined in favor of large agricultural monopolies. The latter feature extensive land ownership scattered in different regions, and the practice of externalizing worker recruitment and management, which appears to be associated with severe labor exploitation (Corrado, 2018). However, South Tyrol has resisted this trend. While the number of farms is declining, the rate is slower than the national average: “13% of south Tyrolean farms had to close. But 37% were lost in Italy” (Farmers’ association, June 25, 2020). These numbers were updated (and the trend confirmed) by the 2021 census. Between 2010 and 2021, 16% of South Tyrolean farms closed, compared to a 30% decline nationally. The average farm size in South Tyrol remained nearly stable (10.2 ha in 2020 compared to 10.9 ha in 2010), while the national average grew from 24.6 ha to 30.7 ha during the same period. Moreover, in South Tyrol, 14,8% of farms own lands measured between 5 and 9,99 ha, and 11,9% even smaller (ASTAT, 2021).

This resilience is attributed by the Labor Inspectorate (interview July 20, 2020) to the generous governmental support and to South Tyrol’s strong cooperative tradition, which dates back to the 19th century and organizes small producers to collectively address challenges. The Farmers’ Association (interview June 25, 2020) explained that the association offers multiple advantages and services to small farms, such as joint distribution and negotiating power both internationally and locally, for instance, bringing local government attention and funding to farmers’ priorities. Direct services to farmers by such organizations include logistic, bureaucratic, and technical services, as well as knowledge dissemination, reciprocal support, and cultural cohesion. The cooperatives’ organization (interview July 07, 2020) explains they handle larger material forms of support, such as banking services, fruit packing and storage, product distribution, and more. Thanks to cooperative structures, many farmers enact forms of multifunctionality, that is, incorporating services other than agricultural production, such as ecological services, touristic services, as well as educational, cultural, and social activities. The income from such activities also contributes to the survival of the small farms.

Cooperative organizations in South Tyrol appear to play two specific protective roles against labor exploitation in fruit and vegetable production.⁴ Firstly, they establish a direct interface with the large distributors and the international markets, reducing the need for numerous intermediaries and resisting price pressures. Secondly, they fulfil a technical role in recruitment and labor management processes. For instance, in the fruit production section, cooperatives have helped address the still pervasive issue of informal arrangements, by facilitating the formalization of contracts, and ensuring compliance with legal provisions, such as safety measures. In the fruit processing, storage, and distribution sector, the local cooperative network manages a significantly larger and more stable workforce, providing additional protections, such as mechanisms of labor stability, skills recognition, transparent labor time tracking, and more.

The Director of the Labor Inspectorate explained, during an

⁴ Labor unions recognize that the milk production is relevant to local agriculture. However, it involves less seasonality, functions with year-round local labor in conditions that appear fair, selling regularly to well established local dairy industries.

interview, that despite the fact that small farms are less subject to formal controls (in fact they dedicate only two workdays a year to controls in agriculture), they experience forms of informal social control, due to their embeddedness in valley communities, particularly around farm worker respect, as opposed to the commodification of labor in extensive and delocalized farming enterprises. He considered that the small dimension of enterprises favors better housing conditions for agricultural workers, by comparison:

“Here we don’t have those latifundia that you sometimes find even in Veneto, with a farmhouse and enormous funds. Here they are generally small estates, a bit like in Trentino. Here, with one or two hectares you already start to support the family with farming, and you can harvest two hectares with the family, plus maybe four, five, or six workers for two weeks, and you’ve done it all. And that is the substantial difference. Whereas if I must harvest ten hectares of tomatoes under the sun, that’s different. Then I have the farmhouse, and the workers sleep under the bridges. Among us, workers under bridges I have never seen them sleeping. Nor are there any slums of foreign seasonal workers. They simply aren’t there” (Labor Inspectorate, July 20, 2020).

In Northwestern Italy a severe problem regards the lack of hosting facilities for summer seasonal workers, in territories like Saluzzo, prompting emergency measures from local councils (*author’s reference*). The collective bodies representing agricultural enterprises’ interests have obtained from local government exceptional building permissions and direct financial aid to allow farmers to build separate living quarters, where they may host seasonal workers during the harvest, or tourists the rest of the year. The Labor Inspectorate confirms that hosting standards for seasonal workers in the province are superior to the national average.⁵

4.3. The situation of cross-border seasonal workers in South Tyrol

Small farms can handle year-round work on their own but need help mostly in the limited time of the harvest. Mountain agriculture tends to resist the mechanization of harvest. Small wagons aid the process of fruit picking, but it is still done by hand. In the past, these helping hands were students, neighbors, and pensioners. Nowadays, this workload is increasingly covered by cross-border seasonal workers, mainly from Eastern Europe. Data from the most recent agricultural census confirms the observations shared by interview partners about the growth of external workers employed by small family farms: “In fact, in 2020 it represents 52,7% of persons dedicated to agriculture (close to 38,000), in comparison with the 34,8% in 2010” (ASTAT, 2023, p.6). Of workers employed by family farms in South Tyrol, 71,9% are occasional laborers, mostly employed for less than 30 working days.

The Labor Market Observatory explains the stratification of hired labor in agriculture in the province, which in the last years amounts to more than 25,000 workers, in three groups: a. *Year-long employees*: around 3,000, mainly local population, dedicated to forestry, livestock, or helping hands around some bigger farms which cannot be managed within the family. b. *Specialized short-term contractors*: around 5000 workers, mainly hired as skilled workers with a higher pay than fruit-pickers, for short terms. They are employed and they rotate between farms, at specific times of the year, for activities that require expertise, mainly in preparation for the harvest: pruning, fruit and leaf thinning, grafting, laying nets, and more. c. *Summer seasonal workers*: between 15 and 20 thousand workers, mainly cross-border seasonal migrants

⁵ Readers could compare the determination of the Provincial Government n.751 of 03.09.2019 with the National Legislative Decree n.81 of 09.04.2008, art. 6, part IV, confirming higher standards in housing, even if the bar is not very high. The same could be said about compensations, which are on average slightly higher than the minimum wage in national standards, and yet again, the bar is very low.

coming from Eastern Europe for a short period, in short contracts with one or more farms.

The management of seasonal workers is not left to individual farms but supported by the farmers’ association, which supports farms in preparing contracts, and pay slips based on the hours they declare, as well as educating producers on requirements of current legislation. Moreover, efforts in quality controls have brought most farmers to adopt the private quality certification promoted by their organization, Global G.A.P., which includes a specific section about social responsibility, called GRASP⁶ (Farmers’ association interview, June 25, 2020). We recognized the value of these self-regulation efforts but shared the skepticism expressed by researchers from neighboring regions, law enforcement agencies, and labor unions about a privately contracted certification, which cannot substitute the adherence to the National Network for Quality Agricultural Work,⁷ scrutinized by national governmental agencies.

The survival of small farms has been identified as a key protective factor against labor exploitation in South Tyrolean agriculture. However, it is argued that the substantial political and economic investments made by the local government to support these farms should be accompanied by robust mechanisms for accountability, oversight, and transparency regarding labor conditions, with a particular focus on seasonal workers.

5. Risk factors and identified strategies to reinforce prevention

In this section, we present the areas identified by stakeholders as generating risk, where prevention measures against exploitation were identified, and in some cases enacted.

5.1. Fostering greater transparency in labor intermediation processes

In South Tyrol, as nationwide, in the sector of agriculture, public labor intermediation initiatives don’t seem effective, and private intermediation channels don’t seem transparent. Moreover, concerning cross-border seasonal workers, dealing with foreign labor intermediation agencies renders public authorities unable to exert any form of monitoring or risk assessment. Moreover, the extremely brief labor engagements on each farm entail a high turnover and fragmentation that is hard to observe, as the numbers available do not account for the different contracts the same worker may have. According to labor unions when cross-border workers have formal contracts at all, they experience contract fragmentation. They recalled a worker who showed to have 17 very short contracts across the same summer (Labor union C, interview October 20, 2020). Labor unions have also observed that the cultural and geographical proximity of Eastern Europeans, which allows for a temporary presence and precludes welfare or social security expectations, has favored the abandonment by the production system of a more structured take-up of agricultural workers. Wages are so low that they no longer attract local workers, not even students or pensioners, as was the case in the past. Labor unions show concern about the extremely low wages of seasonal workers helping with fruit picking, who tend to come increasingly from poorer countries. Data provided by the Observatory of the Labor Market comparing the origin of seasonal workers from 2000 to 2020 attests a shift in countries of origin among seasonal workers towards poorer countries, decreasing arrivals from Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Poland, and increasing from Romania and Bulgaria (Labor Market Observatory, October 13, 2021).

During Covid, the Province financed a digital platform where offer

⁶ https://www.globalgap.org/uk_en/for-producers/globalg.a.p.-add-on/grasp.

⁷ <https://www.inps.it/it/dettaglio-scheda.schede-servizio-strumento.schede-servizi.la-rete-del-lavoro-agricolo-di-qualit-50213.la-rete-del-lavoro-agricolo-di-qualit.html>.

and demand of agricultural labor could meet, in collaboration with the farmers' association, called AgriJobs.⁸ This platform did not seem to respond to the task at the time, because its settings fostered ambiguity (not mandatory for candidates to depict skill or experience, nor mandatory for employers to quantify salary and tasks) resulting in reciprocal frustration. The platform, however, was the starting point for identifying strategies, regarding collaboration between public, private, and third-sector entities. An example that was brought to light was the case of the agricultural cooperatives that employed local workers in packaging and storing facilities, in the central markets and distribution infrastructures. Temporary employees there tend to be residents, often of migrant origin, who work for longer periods than fruit pickers in small farms. Cooperatives coordinate with local third-sector agencies for recruitment and coordinate with public welfare offices for income supplement measures, when necessary and available. This strategy was recognized by labor unions as more protective labor engagement than the foreign-agency recruited cross-border seasonal migrants. Conversations on more protective models are still ongoing.

5.2. *Contrasting widespread irregularity through meaningful controls*

In the Italian national context, the percentage of undeclared labor in agriculture is estimated around 50% (MLPS, 2020). Law enforcement agencies have not uncovered cases of severe labor exploitation in the province so far, and yet they have found numerous cases of undeclared or partially declared work: 'About one in four companies were found to employ workers informally' (Guardia di Finanza press release, December 01, 2021). Labor unions confirm the practice of the partial declaration of hours worked in the pay slip, documenting numerous cases in which, working times and days as registered by workers and those declared in the corresponding pay slip did not coincide, being the latter significantly lower (Labor Union B, September 08, 2020). This doesn't only damage governments, by avoiding taxes, but damages the worker, by rendering it harder to claim a variety of rights, among which salary supplement measures, health insurance, and paid leave.

The formalization of work relations brings an important protection layer against worker exploitation. Presently the law dictates several requirements in hiring workers, such as: acquiring copy of workers documents, presenting a valid contract to the national welfare institute, respectful of established minimum wages, and paying wages to each worker through traceable systems, without intermediaries. However, after that is done, several loopholes still could end up detrimental to the workers: partially undeclared work, excessive charges for hosting services, or fees taken from wages after payment, for intermediaries (Labor Inspectorate, July 20, 2020).

In South Tyrol, the Labor Inspectorate is embedded within the local governments, and not in the Social Security Agency (INPS) paired with specific law enforcement units (NIL), which makes for an ambiguous position. There are benefits, such as an opportunity to combine administrative controls with security controls in the same inspection. However, the Director of the Labor Inspectorate recognizes that the office is chronically under-staffed and under-resourced, and in those conditions, it is hard to enact meaningful controls. In the agricultural sector, the time dedicated to controls is two days a year, during the summer. They have difficulty communicating with immigrant workers since they don't use linguistic mediators (Labor Inspectorate, July 20, 2020).

There are structural and political reasons for such disinvestment. Benedikter notes that "German- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans in the last 50 years not only remain dominant in agriculture but are also more present in the role of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, that is, in those sectors with the strongest growth (tourism, trade, and industry)" (2017, p.181). As the Inspectorate is embedded in the local

government, which represents the German-speaking group, it would be counterintuitive to reinforce controls towards your most faithful electoral base. As a law-enforcement commander said, depicting the difficult position of the Inspectorate to do meaningful controls: "That is like asking the innkeeper if his wine is good: of course, he will tell you it is the elixir of the Gods" (Law Enforcement B, February 18, 2021). Among other factors, we must consider such scarce scrutiny when evaluating the fact that no cases of severe exploitation in agriculture have reached the courts in this territory.

For those reasons, preventive strategies proposed by stakeholders in this area aimed to reinforce the work of the Labor Inspectorate in agriculture, by properly funding and staffing the office, implementing Eastern-European linguistic mediators during inspections, and to widen controls to work and life conditions of seasonal workers, such as accommodation, hygiene, transportation, nutrition, safety, among others. Another strategy regarded a multi-agency approach, by generating complementary synergies between law enforcement controls and labor inspections, including third sector organizations in the antitrafficking network. New connections were created, which may help address known difficulties in the rapid identification of potential victims (Herrera and Nuño, 2024). A law enforcement agency opened a direct channel for antitrafficking units and labor unions to report cases, appointing a person to be immediately reachable, and directly reported to the local Commander, for rapid intervention. The synergy between labor unions and anti-trafficking agencies was also helpful in identifying key problems in emerging situations. Accessible and responsive reporting channels were considered by law enforcement agencies a priority among preventive structures.

5.3. *Breaking the isolation of workers with accessible reporting systems and information*

The geographic isolation of seasonal workers is heightened by hypermobility, as groups of workers are moved from one valley to another and don't always know where they are, nor do they develop any meaningful contact with residents. Moreover, the isolation is also linguistic, as they rarely speak the local language, and rely on one or two more fluent members of the team for communications and arrangements. This generates a greater vulnerability not only making autonomous management difficult for seasonal workers concerning employers, but also concerning their team handlers.

Irregularity and informality of labor relations, as well as depending on employers for hosting contribute to the difficulty of reporting instances of exploitation. Labor Unions cautioned about the informal relations and farm hospitality of seasonal workers, as being a double-edged sword:

"The smaller the company, the more informal the relationship with the employer. It is personal. Sometimes that can be an advantage: if I am friends with my employer, everything is fine. When it goes wrong, the situation is far worse ... [especially] if the person is staying with the employer. (...) If I raise questions or if I start a dispute with the person who hired me, tomorrow I will find myself without a job and without a home (...) If there were facilities for workers to organize their own accommodation, there would also be more freedom to claim their rights at work" (Labor Union A, June 4, 2020).

If workers, for the length of their stay, depend completely on farmers, including housing, there is a higher pressure to comply with employer's demands. Autonomous accommodation may enhance labor agency, and thus be considered a protective factor.

Linguistic barriers also hamper autonomous access to basic information on labor rights, safety measures, and contract conditions. Moreover, it renders it difficult to access essential services, particularly healthcare. The farmers' association explained they distribute a multi-lingual pamphlet on safety measures. However, it hardly satisfies the

⁸ <https://agrijobs.it/en/>.

standards on accessible labor safety instructions in a hazardous environment like mountain agriculture.⁹ Preventive measures, information, and sensibilization campaigns on fair work by Labor Unions are also harder to access because of the geographic and linguistic isolation of seasonal workers. Despite the low unionization of seasonal workers, labor unions are engaged in low-threshold actions and field activities to inform and protect this group, particularly during the summer peak.

The impact of this *field information outreach* by labor unions was enhanced when the project facilitated a partnership with third-sector organizations active in outreach work toward seasonal workers. Measures in this regard were not only identified but immediately enacted, enabling sustained and reciprocal reporting channels between labor unions, anti-trafficking organizations, and law enforcement agencies. Labor unions and anti-trafficking mobile unit operatives created a digital group for quick referral of cases, immediate response to questions on labor, resources, and knowledge sharing, as well as collaborative initiatives, such as training courses on labor rights in migrant communities and in the migrant reception system, sensibilization campaigns towards the citizenship, distribution of multilingual guides detailing labor rights¹⁰, among others.

Among the proposals for prevention stakeholders identified in this area were also greater investments in safety and health-promoting measures among seasonal workers, along with relevant and linguistically accessible training resources and information campaigns to keep seasonal workers safe from injury. Employers suggested that such initiatives could be co-financed by INAIL, the National Institute for Labor Safety.

5.4. Fostering more collaborative bilateral relations

In other regions, bilateral entities which cover areas of common interest between employer organizations and labor unions are usually instrumental in generating a common language, joint initiatives, and a shared knowledge base. For instance, in Veneto, there is a bilateral entity in agriculture that has succeeded in facilitating discussions about preventive measures, work conditions, training programs, networked contracts, and more. In South Tyrol, there is no such entity, and positions of employers and labor unions are extremely polarized. All unions active in the agricultural sector report a strong asymmetry in the negotiation of collective contracts and share the impression that the representatives of the farmers' association 'come to the negotiations knowing that they have enormous power, that their interests are very much represented politically (...) it is like a rubber wall against which any of our demands bounce' (Labor Union A, June 04, 2020). Labor unions also observe that in the cooperative sector of fruit storage and distribution, jobs are more stable, they recruit locally, collaboration is facilitated by continuous dialogue, and worker conditions and timings are verified through transparency mechanisms such as time stamping, not feasible in small and remote farms.

The national law mandates the creation of a local section of the Quality Agricultural Labor Network,¹¹ which labor unions argued would scale up and increase transparency in the efforts for self-regulation of enterprises by including national monitoring devices by the public sector and spreading good practices, but the idea was strongly resisted by the farmers' association. Consequently, the local government would not invest in its implementation.

Even without reaching agreement on all matters, the project brought

⁹ After 13 deaths by agricultural accidents in the year 2010, mainly by tractor rollover, a safety campaign was organized in collaboration between the provincial government and the farmers' association.

¹⁰ https://www.project-farm.eu/io_r-esisto/

¹¹ <https://www.inps.it/it/dettaglio-scheda.scheda-servizio-strumento.schede-servizi.la-rete-del-lavoro-agricolo-di-qualit-50213.la-rete-del-lavoro-agricolo-di-qualit.html>.

into question the asymmetrical tensions that characterize bilateral negotiations of agricultural labor conditions in the setting of collective contracting. It added a new setting with new actors involved in a fact-based dialogue, to grow the area of consensus on context analysis and posit the element of labor exploitation prevention as a common challenge. In that setting, the proposal around which stakeholders could agree was to activate the joint commission that exists in the local government for bilateral dialogue, which is rarely used, to discuss items that went beyond the negotiation of a collective contract, such as courses on safety, recruitment procedures, and more. Moreover, the cooperative sector started a study to evaluate the possibility and convenience of creating a bilateral entity in the province, to expand such collaborative opportunities. The potential that such a space could have is promising in sight of the calls for a "reevaluation of the role of agri-food workers, ensuring that workers are paid a living wage, feel respected and acknowledged for the tasks they undertake and are able to engage with decision-making processes on the issues that affect their lives" (Milbourne and Coulson, 2021, p.438).

6. Discussion of results in terms of content and process

The reflections on this paper are a result of social innovation research process, which created a multi-agency platform focused on the problem of labor exploitation, a problem so complex and structurally embedded in Italian agriculture that no individual agency, discipline or interest group can address on its own. By applying a social innovation approach to the process and the content of this project, we were able to explore the questions that have driven this case study. Other than the methodological process of co-construction of knowledge and interventions, social innovation permeated the framework within which the topic of labor exploitation was addressed by research and action. As Moulart et al. (2013) explain, social innovation

"refers to the changes and agendas, agency and institutions that lead to a better inclusion of excluded groups and individuals into various spatial scales. SI is very strongly a matter of process innovation of changes and the dynamics of social relations including power relations. Therefore, SI is about social inclusion and about countering and overcoming conservative forces that are eager to strengthen or preserve social exclusion situations" (p.17).

The enactment of social innovation research strategies was instrumental to approach the issue of labor exploitation prevention in South Tyrol, by enlarging the debate and decision-making space on temporary labor regimes to new stakeholders, generating and enacting strategies which fostered seasonal workers' access to labor rights and services, and improving more effective and collaborative control mechanisms.

This project identified protective factors that shielded this territory from pervasive and severe exploitation. These include the generous governmental investments and policy support has helped small farms to survive their absorption into large agricultural monopolies and the increasing externalization and precarization of labor described by Corrado (2018). Governmental financial support is generous and unconditional, but so is policy protection. In fact, despite the patriarchal structure of land ownership and succession dispositions, these have protected farm integrity across generations and allowed retention of family-based workforce. Cooperative practices which offer a variety of administrative, technical and distribution infrastructures to small farms, have also been found to contribute to the resilience of small producers. Forms of multifunctional agriculture recognized and supported by the local government, for instance, in the protection of green infrastructures, or ecosystem services, have also been noticed as contributing to small farm survival. Moreover, the embeddedness of small farms in prosperous small rural communities seem to contribute to informal social accountability on the conditions of labor, as degrading hosting conditions, for instance, would be noticed and addressed.

However, according to multiple stakeholders, such contributions

should be linked to social accountability mechanisms, to ensure that such investments protect not only small farmers, but their most vulnerable workers as well. The project challenged the prevailing narratives around cross-border seasonal worker arrangements as if they were always win-win situations (Rye, 2018; Milbourne and Coulson, 2021), has documented precarious and undeclared labor conditions, and questioned skill recognition done only through words, rather than wages (Scott and Rye, 2021). The project built not only knowledge, but collaboration, generating a shared prevention program, calling for a greater uptake of responsibility towards labor conditions, and more meaningful enforcement of labor rights (Bruzeius and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2023).

Key takeaways include the challenges of cross-border seasonal workers documented by labor unions and outreach workers, which could be targeted with preventive measures in other contexts.

- **geographic and social isolation**, as they are hosted by employers in remote farms, without contact with services or unions, and in complete dependence on employers;
- **linguistic and cultural isolation**, as they mostly stay for short times, and do not speak the local languages, which renders it difficult to instruct them on mandatory safety measures or labor rights available in the country of arrival;
- widespread **undeclared or partially declared work**, which makes it difficult for workers to claim their rights, and for authorities to monitor the legality of work conditions;
- **short length of stay**, which bypasses local wage bargaining, collective contracts, and cost of living, while factoring out most long-term welfare measures and unionization;
- **transnational recruitment processes**, which hamper scrutiny from the public sector, including welfare systems and law enforcement;
- **inaccessibility of reporting channels**, regarding labor conditions, which paired with a lack of controls may erode worker agency and keep exploitation underground.

Preventive strategies that were identified were:
Regarding contracts and labor relations.

- Fostering transparency in **declared labor times and wages**, and making sure workers have access to their contractual documents;
- Fostering continuity, with **longer-term contracts** that avoid the extreme fragmentation of labor;
- Fostering effective and accessible **reporting channels**, and enable unionization when feasible.

Regarding migrant workers.

- Fostering **linguistic accessibility** on available services and local labor rights;
- Enabling **autonomous housing** to facilitate social contact and reporting channels;
- Facilitating autonomous access to the labor market and **alternative labor opportunities**, to enhance labor agency.

Regarding local public systems for labor accountability.

- A degree of parity should be protected by local governments between employers' organizations and labor unions, as a protective factor towards decent labor conditions.
- A bilateral entity would allow a more collaborative space between representatives of producers and representatives of workers.
- Greater independence should be fostered in the labor offices of the Provincial government, to ensure that investments on quality of labor reach the whole labor market, especially protecting the weakest positions. In particular, a greater independence and

investment in labor inspections may allow to meaningfully cover the agricultural sector.

As an example of how helpful the latter point could be, we experienced that a measure of independence in data collection agencies allowed their contributions to root discussions on a common set of facts.

One of the main contributions of the social innovation approach was the strategic expertise it fostered in the involvement and relational management of relevant local stakeholders. The process allowed to identify different types of organizations in various sectors which were activated in contributing to preventive structures, and generated connections between them, contributing to a preliminary multi-agency setting (Zadra et al., 2023). The dialogical spaces allowed actors to gain a greater understanding of labor exploitation, and its facilitating factors. Discussions on social policy are very different on a social innovation research platform, where a wide range of stakeholders is present, and all have equal speaking time. Narratives are compared, information circulates, interest positions become visible, and the complexity of the issues is allowed to emerge. The collaborations that FARM has generated among territorial actors had different intensities: some were episodic, others were structured into practice, and still others have given rise to strong, lasting alliances. However, this dialogical process has not been without productive conflict. When different interests collide, conflicts in the context of a problem-centered dialogue may provide a safety valve, which allows the expression of hostile positions and reciprocal criticism between groups with different interests, highlighting the processes of change and reassessment of their views. The mutual conflicts expressed by stakeholders in South Tyrol made it possible to identify specific critical points on which to focus attention. We believe the project resulted in building "counter-hegemonic knowledge and practices which can outlast and outgrow the particular projects or initiatives in which they were born" (Moulaert and MacCallum, 2019, p.84).

The achievements of using a social innovation approach to foster social change were significant. The combination of the expertise among the researchers and the project's operational partners about the context they explored produced initiatives and connections that could neither be planned nor foreseen. Different positions of interest were not dissolved, but common ground (or in some areas the lack thereof) was carefully delineated and enabled reciprocal knowledge and collaboration. In this way, the research that started asking questions about labor exploitation, where it was *considered a non-existent problem*, engaged relevant local actors in asking how to better enact preventive measures against labor exploitation which was finally *conceived as a collective risk*. This was also the result of the processes of reciprocal learning fostered by the social innovation approach. They resulted in a dissemination of knowledge about the stratified phenomenon of labor exploitation (FRA, 2019), fostering in stakeholders an understanding that it is not separate, but connected, to a continuum of precarity (Strauss and McGrath, 2017), in which unfree labor relations (Yea, 2017) can take many forms, even within legal margins, or mobilizing legal frameworks and instruments to exert coercion towards persons in disadvantaged situations (Zadra, 2023). Discussions on labor exploitation must overcome the dualism between *forced or free labor* and consider the wider spectrum of chronic and normalized precariousness.

Another contribution of social innovation is that its goal is not only knowledge but action for social change. The joint declaration of intent was not only words: it brought joint interventions. New synergies between stakeholders activated numerous interventions: training initiatives for operators and users of the reception centers were activated in coordination between the anti-trafficking organizations and the labor unions active in agriculture; new channels were opened for direct reporting to law enforcement; awareness-raising campaigns on fair agricultural work were carried out towards the community, a plan was drafted to create an agricultural bilateral body between the labor unions and the cooperatives organization, and more. Similar interventions were mobilized in the various other regions where FARM was implemented,

with a variety of partners and stakeholders. These included the professionalization of education programs for agricultural workers, the training of employment agencies in accessibility for people in vulnerable situations, the implementation of low-threshold information centers for access to services, and the development of a multilingual information guide for agricultural workers. The outreach work and participative qualification of social professionals in this field were particularly effective.

7. Conclusion

How can labor exploitation be prevented in South Tyrolean agriculture? Which protective factors and risk factors can we identify? Which stakeholders can be mobilized to contribute to generating preventive structures against labor exploitation in agriculture? How can a social innovation research approach contribute to such mobilization? These were the research questions that guided our efforts. We aimed to respond through the outcome of an iterative dialogue with local stakeholders. In section 4 we presented some factors that have contributed to protecting agriculture in South Tyrol from an endemic presence of labor exploitation: the survival of the small farm aided by local government investments, its embeddedness in valley communities as it grants a measure of social control to labor conditions, the cooperative systems that grant a measure of support, monitoring and services to individual farms, among others. In section 5 we presented some risk factors that may enable forms of exploitation and precarity to remain hidden, as well as proposals to improve preventive structures against labor exploitation in South Tyrol. They particularly regard absent reporting systems, understaffed and non-independent controlling bodies and certification systems, tense and asymmetric bilateral relations, as well as diminished labor agency of cross-border seasonal workers. We have discussed in section 6 key takeaways, and how they relate with literature sources, and assessed the process of social innovation that the research project enacted, discussing how this approach could be applied in the prevention of labor exploitation in other territories.

Deterioration of labor conditions does not coincide with labor exploitation, but it may constitute an indicator of risk, as it points to barriers in accessing safe, dignified, and legal work. Until migrant labor is included within transnational spaces of economic citizenship, recognized the right to decent work, and granted some labor agency, the need for better prevention systems will remain. Especially migrant seasonal workers appear most vulnerable to labor exploitation, showing intersectional factors of disadvantage in labor market access and requiring preventive interventions to lower the risk of exploitation. As the case of South Tyrol shows, even if cases of severe labor exploitation in agriculture are rare, there are areas of precarity and risk that should be addressed to avoid undetected exploitation. Moreover, as anti-trafficking organizations point out, fostering a fair and accessible labor market in agriculture has preventive effects against labor exploitation, by enabling decent work alternatives. Many actors must contribute to the fairness and accessibility of the labor market, other than employers and labor unions. Public and private actors, such as those participating in this project, have been mobilized and motivated in solving specific problem areas and will continue studying and implementing solutions.

Problem-centered networks such as the one facilitated by FARM may allow social innovation research to trigger change in the relations between public, private, and third-sector actors at the local level (Moulaert et al., 2017; Zadra et al., 2023), changing how relations between conflicting interests are handled, thresholds for labor conditions are established, control mechanisms are enacted, and essential protections are guaranteed. It may also support jurists involved in this policy issue to “rethink strategies against labor exploitation based on the needs and expectations of migrant workers” in the practice of “rebellious lawyering” (Protopapa, 2022 p.386,390). However, preventive efforts cannot be left to sporadic projects and need more participative and

sustainable forms of governance. We hope more participative research styles may help connect actors across disciplines, agencies, and interests, to generate more sustained interconnected knowledge across systems, and improve societal resilience against labor exploitation.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Franca Zadra: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Susanne Elsen:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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