

Article

# Economic and Social Sustainable Synergies to Promote Innovations in Rural Tourism and Local Development

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**Abstract:** The role of tourism in rural areas is pivotal for the integration and valorization of territorial resources and it is strengthened by the capacity to promote local community participation in processes of development. The paper addresses the issue by presenting and discussing a case study of a rural area of southern Italy where a territorial network for the development of local tourism has been set up. The innovative initiative aimed, firstly, to facilitate a closer connection between production and consumption by reducing transaction costs and, secondly, to connect local production with quality conscious consumers looking for traditional products. The network project also aimed to create conditions conducive to increasing the competitiveness of the local production chain and tourism sector. The case study shows how the challenge for many rural territories lies in increasing levels of trust and rebuilding social capital as a precondition of developing the tourism sector and fostering socio-economic development as a whole. Traditional institutions, as well as hybrid institutions, with the support of research organizations, can play a key role.

**Keywords:** community development; rural tourism; environment and sustainability; social capital; rural development; rural innovation

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, rural areas have undergone significant social and economic change, largely due to the powerful restructuring processes imposed by globalization and, recently, by the financial crisis [1–4] and, also, man's actions, especially the over-exploitation of natural resources and unsustainable farming methods [5]. Added to these challenges is the progressive depopulation of rural areas [6] and the decline of traditional sectors, principally those linked to agriculture [7]. In this scenario, tourism is increasingly looked to as a strategic lever of development that can trigger processes of diversification in agricultural activities and, ultimately, revitalize the economies of rural areas [7–9]. In recent times rural tourism has had to meet the new demands of the modern tourist, who is increasingly looking to experience not just the natural environment but also the cultural heritage and typical products of rural areas [7,10]. This stems from a desire to reclaim a form of cultural identity that has been lost in the process of urbanization but can be rediscovered through rural tourism [11,12].

The strategic role of tourism in rural areas is essentially linked to the integration and valorization of territorial resources and the capacity to promote local community participation in processes of development [5,13]. It is clear that in the competitive and globalized markets of today, networks, clusters, and agglomerations prove crucial to facilitate access to knowledge, resources, markets,

and innovation [7,14,15], and also prove innovative instruments in themselves to support businesses and contribute to local development [16]. On the other hand, it is also increasingly clear that communities, which constitute the socio-economic and environmental sphere in which tourism operates, play a fundamental role both in promoting the territory in its entirety and in guaranteeing the sustainability of processes of local development. However, in order for this to happen, communities must be able to integrate complementary services so that they can provide prospective visitors with a more complete experience. For example, the integration of typical local food products in the tourism sector can bring many benefits, not only for local producers but, also, for the rural destination as a whole because food plays an important role in giving tourists a rich and authentic experience of the local territory [10]. The success of tourism-based projects and their sustainability depends, therefore, on the willingness of the community to actively support and participate in their development [13]. In fact, the most successful tourism initiatives take place in communities where there is a broad participation by residents in the planning and organization of projects [5,7,11,17]. Community actions also prove decisive in mitigating the potential negative effects of tourism [13,18].

However, the development of networks and, to a greater extent, clusters, is not a simple or spontaneous process [16]. It is an extremely complex process that is conditioned by the level of collaboration and trust between the stakeholders involved [15]. There are also many barriers and limitations that can hinder the creation and operation of networks and clusters and limit their capacity for innovation [19,20]. This is particularly the case in rural areas that are economically and socially marginalized, have low population, poor infrastructure, and poor access to resources, all of which are considered drawbacks to entrepreneurship [21].

Despite valid research, both theoretical and applied, into the mechanisms that hinder the creation of networks or clusters, there is still much to learn. The paper forms part of the debate by presenting and discussing a case study of a rural area of southern Italy where a territorial network for the development of local tourism has been set up. The aim of the paper is, therefore, to analyze the mechanisms that promote and/or inhibit the creation and the strengthening of ties between the economic, social and institutional actors present in the researched territory, in the knowledge that the challenge for many rural territories lies in increasing levels of trust and rebuilding social capital as a precondition of development in the tourism sector and socio-economic development as a whole.

## 2. Networking in Tourism and Rural Development—A Literature Review

The central role of rural tourism, defined as all tourism related activities that take place outside of urban areas and involve the natural and cultural patrimony of rural territories, in promoting processes of local development has been widely recognized for decades [7]. There is also an increasing consensus on the need to extend this concept through a holistic approach, which considers the role of the actors and networks involved in rural tourism [5]. Different scholars have adopted the concept of integrated rural tourism (IRT) to refer exclusively to tourism related to the economic, cultural, environmental, and social development of rural areas [5,22]. According to Petrou et al. [22] this is an ideal approach in that it rejects the polarization introduced by more traditional models of development, for example, between exogenous and endogenous resources, and instead focuses on the strategic commercialization of resources and of place, and on an interplay between local and non-local forces in promoting development [22]. Sidali et al. [10] and Murray & Kline [11] analyze, for example, the existing synergies between food production and rural tourism. They consider the integration of local products into the local tourism experience as a strategic move to revitalise the local economy. Adding culinary elements to local tourism allows visitors to learn more about the cultural identity of a territory through its food. Culinary tourism creates new economic opportunities both for local producers and for the local area as a whole, without altering social, environmental, and cultural structures [10,11]. Both studies also observe the spread of a new trend, “neo-localism”, which describes the rejection of globalized food markets in favor of unique products and direct relationships with local producers. The building of exclusive relationships between consumers and producers promotes consumer trust

and customer loyalty, which allows local producers to compete with the big global actors in the food sector [11]. In analyzing the advantages produced by rural tourism networks, Petrou et al. [22], for example, reflect on the way in which formal and informal interactions between economic agents promote the complementarity of territorial resources, thereby allowing the rural tourism destination to offer an integrated product. The firms in the network do not work alone as separate entities but together as joint actors in a system based on trust [22]. The collective commitment of different actors in a network encourages new economic opportunities and the development of new strategies for rural tourism and is made stronger when the definition of network is extended to include the social interactions in a community and not only the “networks” involved in economic exchange [7]. Social networks play an essential role in the economic and social development of rural tourism destinations. The trust built between different members of a network allows for an exchange of knowledge and experience and the emergence of new ideas that can be turned into new strategies for development [7]. Tourism sector operators are almost always small or medium-sized businesses with limited resources, as such collaboration between different operators proves crucial for access to knowledge, resources, markets, and innovation [23]. Collaboration with other businesses allows small businesses to tackle the problem of a lack of resources [24]; furthermore, the friendships that form in a network can prove more valuable than its economic benefits. In fact, partners in a network can view the network as a source of inspiration and feel supported and protected simply by being involved [7].

The analysis of the experience of rural tourism in two Chinese villages, carried out by Ying et al. [17], is another example of how the social dimension of networks is a determining factor in the success of a tourism destination. A comparison of the two experiences shows how community citizenship behaviors play an essential role in defining the economic ties between local tourism operators and local residents. The cooperative behavior of a community acts in the economic interest of individual businesses and, in this way, contributes to the development of the whole territory [17]. Attributes such as altruism, kindness, and personal commitment create a climate of cooperation between different actors in the network and improve the effectiveness of tourism projects.

Another important argument found in the research literature is the role of micro-clusters and networks in supporting processes of tourism development in rural areas [15,16,25–27]. Starting from the concept of clusters, developed by Porter [28], and moving the analysis from a macro-regional context to that of local territories, the agglomeration effect of clusters is seen as “a process that enables the participants to exploit their synergies and the complementarities between their outputs, especially when operating at SMEs level. Benefits could include knowledge transfer, preservation of community values, and lifestyle improvement” [16].

The complementarity of firms located in the same geographical area determines what Michael [27] describes as “diagonal clustering”, that is the creation of value not just for cluster members but also for the local tourism experience as a whole, thereby contributing to create a specialized regional product. Existing networks and alliances are decisive in creating clusters and facilitate the strengthening of cooperation between firms, based on exchange, sharing, and co-development of products or services [23,29].

Trust and social capital are crucial to the processes of cooperation and networking that characterize integrated rural tourism, and also in the operation of clusters [23,30]. They prove fundamental in influencing the willingness of firms to cooperate, create alliances, and actively work together to reach long term goals, valorizing collaboratively the available resources [16]. The network represents an ideal arena for sharing new ideas, some of which are embraced, others rejected [5,7]. In this arena, the local community plays a decisive role in building and re-designing local development [31].

Social capital also helps mitigate the potential negative effects of tourism. The development of tourism can bring about both positive and negative changes that affect the quality of life of communities. Tourism generates new income streams for local businesses and local government, provides new opportunities for local residents, revitalises local economies, and promotes the protection of local environmental and cultural resources [7,18]. Tourism can also come with social and economic costs,

such as the risk of communities developing an over-reliance on one particular industry whose success is or failure is beyond their control, anti-social behavior, and the formation or exacerbation of problems relating to pollution [5,18].

Park & Boo [18] highlight that a community's social capital can contribute significantly to the region's *governance*. This is especially true in situations where the government is unable to provide sufficient resources for positive project planning, due to lack of information, or in cases where local development plans promoted by institutions or the market are not in line with the interest of the local community. In this context, a community's capacity to "network" proves essential in facilitating the development of new economic strategies and in supporting the projects that are advantageous and sustainable for communities [13].

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Description of the Territory Involved in the Project

The area involved in the project "La Rete del Buon Vivere" (The "Good Living" Network), the Antica Volcei Alburni territory, covers nearly 1000 square km and includes 27 municipalities, some of which fall within the National Park of Cilento, Vallo di Diano, and Alburni, the largest Italian National Park. The area researched is located in the Campania region, in the province of Salerno (southern Italy) (Figure 1).

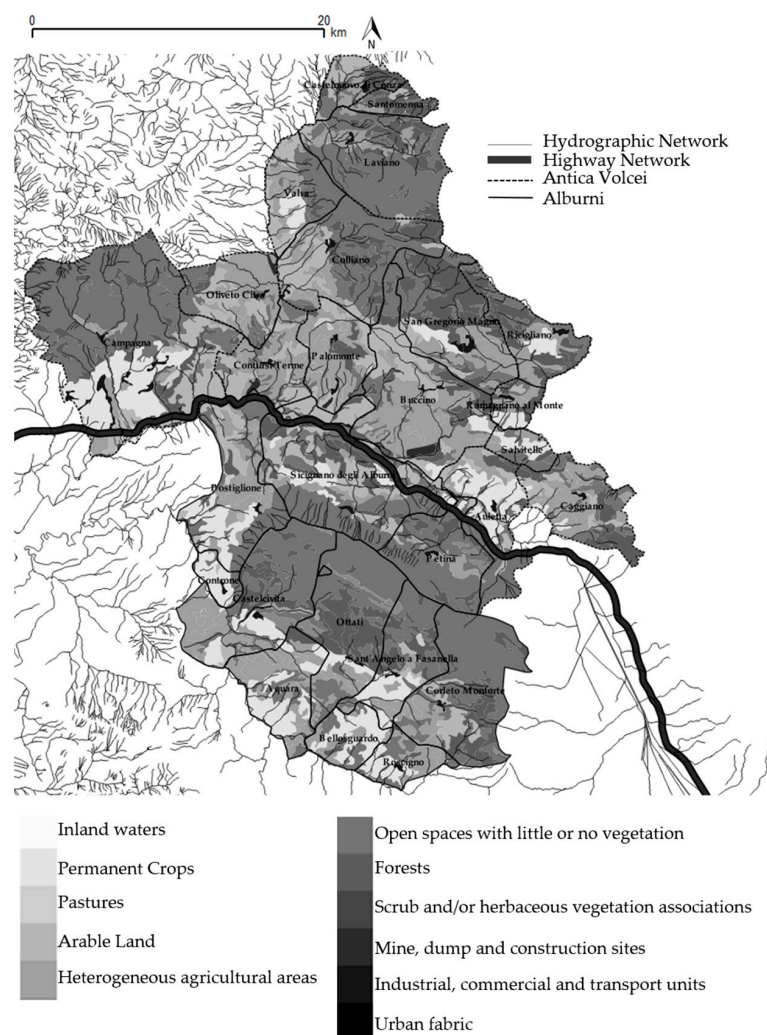


Figure 1. Researched area.

This territory has always found its principle source of income and development in agriculture and connected artisanal businesses. The local agriculture is characterized by the specific problems and limitations associated with farming in mountainous areas. In recent years, the combined effects of economic crisis, globalization, and changes in lifestyle and consumption have significantly altered the environmental, social, and economical structures of the territory. One of the biggest changes seen across the whole territory has been population decline. Currently, the area has a population of about 67,100 people, with an average population density of about 64 people per kilometre, where the majority of municipalities have less than 2000 inhabitants. In the last 10 years, there has been an overall decrease in population of about 4.90 percent, or 3290 residents [32].

Aside from geographical constraints, the principal driver of depopulation in the area is the scarcity of jobs caused by the abandonment of traditional businesses/activities and the lack of services in the local area. Compared to other sectors, tourism is showing positive signs of growth. In recent years there has been an increase in new forms of tourist accommodation (Bed and Breakfasts, Holiday Homes, and agro-tourisms) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Rural firms and percentage of change.

Sector	Year 2000	Year 2010	% Change
Agriculture (number of farms)	14,533	13,273	−9%
<b>Agriculture (hectares of utilised agricultural area)</b>	45,947	42,958	−7%
Livestock farming (number of farms)	3200	1121	−65%
Manufacturing (number of firms)	242	307	+27%
Hotels	15	25	+67%
Agro-Tourism and other Accommodation (number of structures)	16	52	+225%

Source: [32].

Despite all the difficulties facing the local territory the area is rich in natural resources and enjoys an uncontaminated landscape that sets the stage for high-quality, traditional production. Typical local products include Extra Virgin Olive Oil, dairy products, and top-quality cured meats from free-ranged and grass-fed cattle. The area also produces a range of “minor crops”, for which demand is growing rapidly. Examples of minor crops are local bean (*fagiolo*) varieties such as, the *Fagiolo Bianco di Controne*, the *Fagiolo Tondino di Auletta*, and the *Fagiolo Occhio Nero di Oliveto Citra*, the well-known *Carciofo Bianco* (White Artichoke) from Pertosa (also Slow Food Presidium), mountain potatoes, and mixed berries and strawberries. Table 2 shows the traditional food products produced in the territory and their relative certification.

**Table 2.** Certified products in the Antica Volcej Alburni researched territory.

Certification	Product
<b>Products with a protected designation of origin (PDO)</b>	
PDO Colline Salernitane	Olive Oil
PDO Mozzarella di Bufala Campana	Buffalo Mozzarella
PDO Fico Bianco del Cilento	Figs
PDO Caciocavallo Silano	Caciocavallo cheese
<b>Products with a protected geographical indication (PGI)</b>	
PGI Carciofo di Paestum	Artichoke
<b>Wines P.D.O./D.O.C.G. Denomination of controlled and guaranteed origin</b>	
DOC Castel San Lorenzo	Wine
<b>Slow Food Presidium</b>	
Slow Food Presidium Carciofo Bianco di Pertosa and Auletta	White Artichoke
Fagiolo Bianco di Controne	Bean
<b>Traditional products from the Campania region</b>	
Fagiolo dell’Occhio	Bean
Fagiolo Bianco di Controne	Bean



### 3.2. Description of the Rete del Buon Vivere Network Project

The *Rete del Buon Vivere* network project, which promoted the establishment of a territorial network, was set up under measure 2.2 A of the Local Development Strategy (LDS) “*I Sentieri del Buon Vivere*” (Pathways to Good Living) via the *Buon Vivere* Local Action Group (LAG), as part of the Campania Region’s Rural Development Plan 2007–2013. The LAG is a not for profit consortium of public and private partners whose aim is to promote local development. The LAG was set up in May 2010 and counts 202 partners; 27 local authorities, 2 mountain communities, and 173 private entities with varied interests (e.g., “Pro Loco”, which are local organizations in Italy for the promotion of the local territory, Associations, Farmers Trade Unions). The central theme for the implementation of the LDS is the integrated and sustainable development of the Antica Volcei Alburni territory through the strengthening of local networks and the diversification and improvement of the territory’s touristic attractiveness. The strategy is based on the principal that the future of these rural areas is dependent on providing more jobs and increasing economic activity, as well as maintaining and attracting younger, more active members of the population.

What is the Rete del Buon Vivere Network? The *Rete del Buon Vivere* Network project aims to increase the multi-functionality of the rural area through creating synergies among firms: farms, tourism sector operators (hotels, B&Bs, agro-tourisms etc.) food and wine producers, craft businesses and between firms and micro-attractors of tourism in the territory (natural landscape, cultural attractors, archaeological sites, and thermal springs). Creating and strengthening these types of sectoral and inter-sectoral networks is designed to promote a local tourism model that plays heavily on the area’s rurality and traditions and is able to offer visitors a tailor-made experience with a wide range of touristic “itineraries” and activities to discover during their stay in the territory.

The objective of the Network is, then: “an integrated and sustainable development of the Antica Volcei Alburni territory through”:

- Strengthening local networks;
- Diversifying and improving local productions and attractors;
- Strengthening the tourist attractiveness of the rural area;
- Promoting natural and cultural territorial resources;
- Promoting and valorizing local production chains;
- Integrated territorial promotion, as part of the *Buon Vivere* system.

Who are the recipients of the project? The recipients of the project are: operators in the rural tourism sector, local craft businesses, producers and processors of typical products and existing micro-attractors for tourism in the LAG territory. The sectors involved in the project include: Agro-forestry; Agriculture; Livestock farming; Craft food businesses; Traditional Manufacturing; Local Restaurants; Agro-Tourism and other accommodation; Retail Businesses; Managing Authorities of tourism attractors and local Institutions; “Pro Loco” (Organizations for the promotion of the territory).

How the project was implemented? The project was divided in two phases. In the first phase, which ran from February 2013 to December 2013, the six selected rural animators contacted stakeholders and carried out an in-depth audit of each sector. The sector audits were designed, firstly, to better understand the existing problems and also potential opportunities in each sector, secondly, to establish whether there were existing synergies in place between sectors and, finally, to identify any criticalities perceived by stakeholders across the sectors. In the second phase, which ran from March 2014 to June 2015, actions for the animation of the territory began with meetings and sectoral and inter-sectoral workshops. During this phase, two additional rural animators joined the project.

### 3.3. Methodology

The research took the form of a case study approach [33,34]. The case study approach lends itself well to the study of how networks are formed and change over time given that networks are intrinsically

linked to the context they are set in [35]. The three authors of the paper were actively involved in the project; one author acted as a LAG coordinator and the remaining two authors are members of a research institute that closely followed the LAG at every stage of the project. This allowed a close observation of both phases of the project, the sectoral audit phase and the territorial animation phase. After an initial stage, based mainly on the analysis of secondary data to understand the dynamics of each sector on an extra-local scale, researchers were given the opportunity to participate and take notes in all the meetings and workshops that took place during the project. The privileged viewpoint allowed the researchers to observe, in real time, how the networks were set up, how relationships were formed, and how barriers were overcome. Naturally, this type of methodological approach puts the reliability and validity of the data collected into question and risks generalizations being made. For this reason, triangulation of the results obtained was very important, as well the accuracy and transparency of the analysis.

#### 4. Results

The first phase, the sectoral audit, revealed weak relationships between local actors and a series of organizational and psychological barriers that were unrelated to technology or economics. One of the biggest problems perceived by the representatives of the different industries involved in the project is the poor awareness of the different products, activities, and services available in the community, which reveals a poor knowledge of local resources. Often this is because of physical restraints (bad road networks, poor transport links, lack of infrastructure) that not only prohibit contact between the rural businesses in the researched area and external communities and markets, but also prohibit internal contact between the rural businesses in the researched area itself. However, the lack of knowledge and awareness of local resources and production conceals a lack of trust between local actors and a lack of price competition in some productive sectors. Many local consumers do not buy local products and services, favoring instead the convenience of readily available, pre-packaged, mass consumer goods. It is often the case that local farmers have even the highest quality local olive oil that they just cannot sell, whilst restaurants and local consumers are buying mass-produced olive oil, whose quality and provenance is unknown, but is easily purchased and presented in attractive, user-friendly packaging. Often there is a psychological barrier to overcome rather than economic or technical barriers: sometimes it is enough to establish a dialogue between the two worlds of producers and consumers to make people see the mutual benefit and potential advantage to the whole community of buying local products.

The second phase of the project was focused on linking of the ten public and private sectors involved in the project (Agro—forestry; Agriculture; Livestock Farming; Craft food businesses; Traditional Manufacturing; Local Restaurants; Agro-Tourism and other accommodation; Retail Businesses; Managing Authorities of tourism attractions and Local Institutions; Pro Loco Organizations for the promotion of the territory).

The project was specifically implemented through:

- Meetings between operators in the same sector (Table 3);
- Meetings between operators from different sectors (Table 4);
- Meetings between operators from different productive sectors and public bodies and associations (Table 4);
- Meetings between operators from different sectors in the LAG territory and external operators (Table 5).

Table 3. Sectoral Meetings.

Meetings between Operators in the Same Productive Sector			
Sector	Number of Meetings	Number of Participants	Average Number of Participants
Agro-forestry; Agriculture	48	146	3
Livestock farming	36	76	2
Craft food businesses	30	90	3
Traditional Manufacturing	39	117	3
Local Restaurants	30	50	2
Agro-Tourism and other Accommodation	36	79	2
Retail Businesses	25	30	1
Managing Authorities of tourism attractors and local Institutions; Pro Loco	15	60	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>259</b>	<b>648</b>	<b>-</b>

Table 4. Inter-sectoral Meetings.

Meetings between Operators from Different Productive Sectors			
Sector	Number of Meetings	Number of Participants	Average Number of Participants
Agro-tourism and other Accommodation; Agro-forestry; Agriculture; Livestock farming	4	28	7
Agro-tourism and other Accommodation; Traditional Manufacturing	1	3	3
Agro-tourism and other Accommodation; Livestock farming	1	3	3
Agro-tourism and other Accommodation; Livestock farming; Craft food businesses	1	6	6
Craft food businesses; Agro-forestry; Agriculture	2	45	23
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>-</b>
Meetings between Operators from Different Productive Sectors and Public Bodies and Associations			
SECTOR	Number of Meetings	Number of Participants	Average Number of Participants
Agro-tourism and other Accommodation; Livestock farming; Managing Authorities of tourism attractors and local Institutions; Pro Loco	2	8	4
Agro-tourism and other Accommodation; Local Restaurants; Agro-forestry; Agriculture; Managing Authorities of tourism attractors and local Institutions; Pro Loco	3	13	4
Agro-forestry; Agriculture; Agricultural Associations	15	215	14
Managing Authorities of tourism attractors and local Institutions; Pro Loco; Local Restaurants	5	270	54
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>506</b>	<b>-</b>



**Table 5.** Meetings between LAG and external operators.

Meetings between Operators from Different Sectors in the Lag Territory and External Operators				
SECTOR	Number of Meetings	Number of Participants	Average Participants	Number of External Operators (Tour Operator, Buyer)
Agro-forestry; Agriculture; Livestock Farming; Craft food businesses; Traditional Manufacturing; Local Restaurants; Agro-tourism and other Accommodation; Retail Businesses; Managing Authorities of tourism attractions and Local Institutions; Pro Loco	9	190	21	150

Overall, 302 meetings were held involving 1429 participants. The project saw a progressive increase in participation from its beginning, in February 2013, to its conclusion, in June 2015. In the first year, in fact, 473 participants were registered, in the second year 575, and in the final year 382 participants were registered (in the six months that the project ran).

#### 4.1. Definition and Implementation of “Patti del Buon Vivere”

The “Patti del Buon Vivere” (Buon Vivere Pacts) are the final and most important aim of the Rete del Buon Vivere Network project and represent the culmination of all the project’s activities. The actions carried out to animate the territory, to raise community awareness, to involve local actors, and to foster collaboration, together with the research carried out into the problems and requirements of the different productive sectors, has resulted in an increased trust and a greater willingness to cooperate amongst local actors. This trust and cooperation provides an essential basis on which to build local and extra-local alliances and synergies.

Thanks to this trust and the in-depth research carried out into the weaknesses and potential strengths of the sectors operating in the territory, the project was able to create relationships between the firms in the territory with an aim to provide opportunities for new forms of development, boost demand for local products, and simply bring people working in the same industry together with the common aim of fostering the maximum growth possible in their sector.

The Buon Vivere Pacts are set up as promotional/commercial agreements between participating firms in the Network (Table 6).

The purpose of the Buon Vivere Pacts is to facilitate the creation of an integrated system of territorial resources (natural, touristic, productive, artistic etc.). The agreements, therefore, have the principal aim of building relationships across the territory in order to give the Alburni Antica Volceja territory, with its basket of products and services, a strong brand identity. The Pacts were drawn up to be of mutual benefit to all parties involved and aim to promote local and extra-local demand for local productions and, especially, to promote short supply chains, or in some cases 0 km supply chains, across the whole of the LAG’s territory.

The result has been the signing of a total of 49 Pacts, all of which were actively promoted by the LAG. Overall, 69 local actors (firms, associations, public bodies etc.) have signed up to the Pacts (see Table 7 for details on participants by sector).

The LAG has promoted the Pacts through its website and through the dissemination of publicity material explaining the aims of the agreements. All of the Pacts’ signatories have also committed to promote and publicize the products of fellow members in their own enterprises.

**Table 6.** Examples of Buon Vivere Pacts.

Sectors Involved	Number of Actors Involved	Object of Pacts
AGRICULTURE-CRAFT FOOD-RETAIL BUSINESS	4	The signatories committed to promote the supply and trade of products such as grain, flour, semi-processed flour-based products, fresh and dried pasta etc. The food processing firm which signed up to the Pact agreed to buy its grain and flour and other similar products from a farm and a farmers' cooperative involved in processing agricultural produce for the production of fresh pasta, dried pasta, and other products in their line. The suppliers guarantee the quality and provenance of products required by the processing firm. The parties can also decide to apply discounts and/or promotional offers on the products/services being traded.
AGRICULTURE AND RESTAURANTS	3	The restaurant committed to buy strawberry flavored jams and preserves, wild strawberries and berries from a local farm to use in the preparation of dishes at the restaurant. The farm guarantees the quality and provenance of the products supplied in the quantities and time scales required by the restaurant.
RETAIL BUSINESS AND AGRICULTURE	3	The retailer committed to buy strawberries, wild strawberries, and berries supplied by a local farm to then sell on in their retail outlet. The farm guarantees the quality and provenance of the products supplied in the quantities and time scales required by the retailer.

**Table 7.** Pacts classified by sector.

Sector	Number of Participants in the Buon Vivere Pacts (Number of Pacts Signed 49)
Agro-forestry; Agriculture	12
Livestock farming	0
Craft food businesses	22
Traditional Manufacturing	4
Local Restaurants	9
Agro-tourism and other Accommodation	9
Retail Businesses	2
Managing Authorities of tourism attractors and local Institutions; Pro Loco	11
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>69</b>

Table 8 distinguishes among three types of Pacts: sectoral (involving one productive sector); Inter-Sectoral (involving two or more productive sectors); Pacts between productive sectors and public bodies (Managing Authorities of micro attractors and Institutions) and private associations (Pro Loco).

**Table 8.** Pacts classified by type.

Type of Pacts	Number
Sectoral	2
Inter-sectoral	42
Pacts between productive sectors and Managing Authorities of micro attractors and local Institutions, Pro Loco	5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>49</b>

#### 4.2. Other Initiatives Started within the la Rete del Buon Vivere Network Project

“Dispensa del Buon Vivere”. The “Dispensa del Buon Vivere” (The “Buon Vivere Pantry”) is a virtual shop window which displays local products and provides information on the local producers who make them. The products are divided by category and range from fresh produce to processed meat and vegetable-based goods and represent over 70 farms and food businesses. The project was started after detailed research across the whole territory into all the products and services on offer. What started as a small group of businesses coming together turned into an active network of operators looking to build exchange and collaboration between inter-sectoral and extra-sectoral, as well as extra-local, operators within the territory. The decision to set up the “Dispensa” as a sort of register of local goods proved a positive one because it serves as a readily accessible and easy to consult instrument to gather and organise all the local products available for people in the sector, restaurateurs and tourism operators, as well as anyone interested in finding out more about the territory through sampling local traditional food.

Creation of a Calendar of Events. A calendar of events and initiatives in the territory was made to avoid potential overlaps and give visitors an overview of the available program.

Creation of a Web Platform promoting businesses in the territory. The portal was designed to allow all the operators in the territory (institutions, farms, tourism operators, traditional manufactures, food processing firms, restaurants, local businesses) to promote their activities in the virtual shop window through a business profile page. The profiles include a description of the business, photos, and videos.

Creation of a Promotional Catalog. An illustrative catalogue of the cultural heritage of the territory was published in order to publicize the lesser known attractions and experiences available to tourists.

“Mense del Buon Vivere”. The “Mense del Buon Vivere” (The Buon Vivere Kitchen”) is an initiative to promote 0 km food supply chains in the LAG territory by giving small local producers access to food-processing machinery. The LAG provided an innovative piece of processing equipment, which is able to produce preserves, jams, sauces and many other products quickly and safely, on the basis of a five-year loan. The equipment is housed in a food laboratory in one of the municipalities in the territory but can be accessed by all residents. The equipment also has a vacuum packing system that gives products a longer shelf life, prevents oxidation, and preserves the integrity of the products’ ingredients. The initiative aims to support very small local producers of agricultural goods, especially those farming for personal consumption and without stable sales channels, to increase awareness of local traditional foods and, finally, to encourage a culture of healthy eating and eating traditional products, particularly amongst young people who tend to eat more and more mass-produced foods. The local authority that houses the laboratory undertakes to:

- Manage the equipment on behalf of the LAG, guaranteeing its availability to the residents in the 27 municipalities in the territory for at least five years;
- Manage the workshop where the equipment is held;
- Valorize local production through promoting and supporting high quality traditional food production across the territory;
- Broaden the range of products coming out of the territory by providing new markets for local production.

## 5. Discussion

This study focuses on the process of building a network, promoted by a public-private partnership, which is able to connect all the various social and economic actors in a territory with an aim to create an integrated rural tourism product. The project area was characterized by very poor levels of collaboration and exchange between local actors as a result of various driving forces, mainly related to the depopulation and geographical and psychological marginalization of the area compared to urban centres. These characteristics are found in many rural areas around the world, which makes the

results of this study generally applicable to many contexts. The remoteness of many rural businesses, including those working in tourism, creates a competitive disadvantage [36] and a peripheralization of the local market compared to densely populated urban areas where demand is concentrated. This fuels a vicious circle of out-migration and lack of entrepreneurial opportunities [21,37] and, also, the increased fragmentation and lack of coordination of rural activities [38].

This sense of disconnection from urban areas and urban lifestyle has long been a source of frustration for people living in rural areas and has resulted in rural residents feeling a lack of confidence and belief in their self-worth. The trends seen in recent years towards a re-discovery of rural life and traditional local products and towards a re-localization of production, have predominately taken hold in urban centres and still have not reached, or have only partially reached, rural areas. This in spite of the fact that for years now the political agenda and rhetoric on rural development, particularly in Europe, has been moving strongly in this direction. An initial element that emerges from the research carried out is, therefore, closely linked to the importance of identifying shared spaces for local actors where they can jointly create and negotiate a shared vision of community development and, in doing so, gain a greater sense of belonging to their community. The long and laborious work of animation in the case study territory shows the importance of rebuilding community ties and promoting a greater sense of community through a long-term, inclusive, transparent, and democratic approach. The work of animation in the case study territory required breaking down cultural barriers and creating the right opportunities for the local context to build synergies between actors in the same sector and between actors operating in different sectors. Because the case study area is predominately agricultural, whose value system is still heavily influenced by an inward-looking rural mentality, the starting point was building a link between food and tourism, which could then be extended to the other actors in the territory. As highlighted by Sidali et al. [10], food products are not only important for enriching the local tourism experience but also for producers who, unwittingly or not, start to build their own identity through their product. The strengthening of the link between tourism and local food is also considered an important driver for sustainable rural development [10]; Murray & Kline [11], as it intersects the trend for “neo-localism”, a type of “resilience to globalization” [31] or, as highlighted by Schnell [39], an adherence to local ties done consciously and not out of necessity as happened in the past.

The study confirms what has already been widely found by many other scholars [7,15,16], that trust is an essential pre-condition for developing networks. Ying et al. [17] effectively show how Granovetter’s concept of social embeddedness [40] manages to explain the transactional relationships within and between economic sectors. The authors also show how levels of trust and relationships between actors prove to be a discriminating factor in making economic choices alongside purely economic variables [17]. However, trust cannot come about spontaneously and takes time to build [41]. Time is, in fact, a crucial factor. In the case study presented, participation in meetings and actor involvement increased progressively as the project went on, showing a cumulative effect of trust. The role of the LAG was mainly to help “re-vitalise” social capital [42] both in terms of bonding, that is inside each sector, and in terms of bridging, that is between the various socio-economic elements in the territory [43] and also between the local territory sectors and extra-local actors. In fact, social capital, as envisioned by Putnam [42], has a value which expresses itself in the quantity and quality of the social relationships behind the development of networks, regulations, trust, and group action aimed at achieving common objectives [44] and in the extent to which these relationships contribute to defining the cohesiveness of the territory. These elements prove fundamental in defining the performance of tourism destinations as they influence their ability to adapt to changing demand and get creative with their resources in order to remain competitive [45]. The fact that the LAG acted as a facilitator in the process, covering a role of leadership [46], whilst remaining neutral and *super-partes*, was crucial to the project’s success. This proved to be a key factor in overcoming the psychological and cultural barriers discussed previously and allowed the LAG to act as a mediator between the different requirements and needs of all the stakeholders involved. As highlighted by Saxena [15], in fact, “the only realistic manner of approaching a future state of balanced development is not through a single holistic giant

step but by incrementally adopting distinctive measures that encourage collective learning processes, in which the diverse actors at a destination can contribute and participate" [15] (p. 287).

The LAG, as an expression and product of the local community, was also able to convey the requests of the communities in the process, recognising the role of key stakeholders in defining the paths of territorial development. In fact, emphasis was placed on building a sense of collectiveness and on the mutual benefits of the proposed cooperative behaviors. The choice to promote agreements, although formal, which did not place exclusive constraints on parties, allowed the networks which were forming to be dynamic and flexible and allowed them to become instruments able to evolve and adapt to changes (in the scenario). The Pacts signed are proof of how trust, and the building of social capital in general, have contributed to soften the various "barriers" which previously stood in the way of their diffusion. A shared vision of territorial development, of quality, all intangible elements, became the *trait d'union* of the construction of a tie able to unite economic and social actors who are very different in terms of their degree of market integration and individual strategies. The case study, therefore, reinforces the idea that co-presence of different entities that can prove complementary in a territory is an essential condition for the development of networks and clusters, but that this alone is not enough. It is also necessary to act on determining levers such as building trust and re-construction of community ties.

## 6. Conclusions

The study describes the development of an innovative initiative that aimed, firstly, to facilitate a closer connection between production and consumption by reducing transaction costs and, secondly, to connect local production with quality conscious consumers looking for traditional products. The network project also aimed to create conditions conducive to increasing the competitiveness of the local production chain and tourism sector.

The Buon Vivere Network took almost two years to cohesively implement its two principal lines of intervention: the audit on existing territorial nodes and the identification and promotion of suitable pathways to connect nodes, thereby fostering a greater diffusion and appreciation of the territory's rurality and traditions as a positive quality for development.

Finally, the project had the aim of promoting uniform economic development in the territory by creating a coherent strategy to link supply with demand for local products and services. The Pacts are proof of how the project improved cohesion and integration in the territory, giving communities back a sense of identity.

"Quality rurality", whose central component is quality agricultural produce, is therefore increasingly seen by local communities, administration and businesses as an opportunity for development. The available resources in the rural territory are re-evaluated in this light, marking a passage from a development model dictated by exogenous forces, and based largely on sectoral frameworks, to an endogenous development model, which uses the territory's material and human resources to guarantee collective local participation in managing policies and in defining development pathways that are oriented towards the integration of local economic activities, the valorization of local resources, and sustainability.

Capturing the distinctive feature of rural development, and its appeal in terms of tourism, lies in knowing how to rethink drivers of development through; promoting the coexistence of inclusive processes to regenerate social capital; building and strengthening existing networks between the rural territory and external areas (particularly between rural areas and urban centres); job creation; and, finally, economic growth. In the same way, a balanced model of rural development must also be based on coherence between the rural area's ability to attract external resources and its ability to generate internal opportunities, ensuring that actions for rural development meet the collective needs of the territory.

The study, although limited to a single case study, has shown the importance of integration and cooperation. However, the study has also shown that the use of these instruments cannot take place in a vacuum but, instead, must be built on a foundation of strong and healthy community ties. Traditional

institutions, as well as hybrid institutions, with the support of research organizations, can play a key role. Future development of the study could take the direction of examining the sustainability of the initiative and assessing its social, economic, and environmental implications so that the model can be replicated in similar contexts.

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