The Role of Volunteering in Social Innovation in a Peripheral Area. Evidence from a Case Study

Anna Sola

Master's student, University of Calabria,

Department of Humanities, e-mail: anna321sola@gmail.com

Carmelo Arena*

PhD Student, University of Calabria,

Department of Business Administration and Law, e-mail: carmelo.arena@unical.it

*(corresponding author)

Laura Ferraro

PhD Student, University of Calabria,
Department of Business Administration and Law, e-mail: laura.ferrraro@unical.it

Diego Mazzitelli

Research Fellow, University of Calabria,
Department of Business Administration and Law, e-mail: diego.mazzitelli@unical.it

Abstract: This article examines how volunteering contributes to social innovation in a marginalized territory, specifically Calabria. To achieve this objective, we conduct a case study on the Castrovillari section of the Italian Red Cross (CRI), which has been actively engaged in social development projects in the *Alto Tirreno Cosentino* area for years. The findings highlight the crucial role of volunteer organizations in fostering social innovation in disadvantaged regions, raising social awareness, and addressing Calabria's structural social challenges. This study contributes to exploring volunteering in a region with unique social dynamics shaped by its peripheral location, a context that has been largely overlooked in the literature. The analysis underscores the need for further investigation into the social and economic dynamics of marginalized communities in Italy and Europe. Additionally, it provides practical implications by identifying effective strategies for sustainability and social impact while recommending that policymakers enhance support for volunteer initiatives.

1. Introduction

In recent years, global social and cultural dynamics have increasingly emphasized the need for a renewed humanistic development paradigm, one that foregrounds environmental sustainability, social equity, and the inclusion of all individuals across societal levels (Caridà et al., 2022). Within this evolving context, social innovation (SI) has emerged as a central concept in addressing persistent challenges such as economic inequality, institutional fragility, and social exclusion, particularly in disadvantaged or marginalized areas (Ayoungman et al., 2025). SI refers to new ideas, strategies, and organizational forms that aim to respond to complex social problems more effectively and sustainably than traditional models, by enhancing community well-being, fostering inclusive governance, and promoting participatory practices (Ayoungman et al., 2025).

Volunteering represents a key element within this context. Traditionally defined as the voluntary and unpaid engagement of individuals in activities benefiting society, volunteering has long been associated with social cohesion and community development (Social Innovation Academy, 2020). However, contemporary scholarship increasingly frames volunteering as a driver of systemic change, contributing not only to service provision, but also to the activation of local capacities and the empowerment of communities as active agents of development (De Wit et al., 2019). This is especially relevant in peripheral territories, which often face structural deficits in financial resources, infrastructure, and skilled human capital. In such contexts, volunteers can fill critical gaps by mobilizing time, expertise, and networks in support of locally grounded initiatives (De Wit et al., 2019; Kuznetsova, 2020). For example, in regions with limited access to public health services, volunteer healthcare workers may provide essential care and education to underserved populations (White et al., 2023).

Despite the growing recognition of volunteering's transformative potential, its specific role in enabling SI within the marginalized territories of Southern Italy remains insufficiently explored. Existing studies tend to focus on broader European contexts (Bock, 2016) or urban areas, such as Naples (Cattivelli & Rusciano, 2020), leaving rural and peripheral territories comparatively understudied. This paper addresses this gap through a qualitative case study of CRI Castrovillari, an organization operating in Alto Tirreno Cosentino, a socially and economically marginalized area of Calabria. Calabria, among Italy's most disadvantaged regions, faces persistent challenges including high unemployment, population decline, and limited institutional capacity (ISTAT, 2021). Yet, Castrovillari offers a compelling example of how volunteer-driven initiatives can catalyse community-based solutions aligned with the tenets of SI and theories of social capital (Putnam, 2000).

Its strategic location between Calabria and Basilicata also illustrates how peripheral regions can activate interregional linkages and local assets to foster bottom-up innovation (Landström, 2010).

This study seeks to address two interrelated research questions: (1) How do volunteer-driven initiatives contribute to the emergence and diffusion of social innovation in marginalized areas? (2) What mechanisms enable volunteering to build and mobilize social capital in these contexts?

The relevance of this research is twofold. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature on social innovation by shedding light on the often-overlooked role of volunteering in contexts where institutional responses are limited or ineffective. Second, it offers practical insights for policymakers, practitioners, and civil society actors interested in leveraging volunteer-based approaches to promote sustainable, inclusive development in peripheral and disadvantaged regions.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of social innovation and volunteering, highlighting their intersections and relevance in marginalized contexts. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, focusing on the case study design and data collection strategies. Section 4 presents the findings, illustrating how volunteering has facilitated SI in Castrovillari. Section 5 discusses the broader implications of these findings and concludes with reflections and suggestions for future research.

2. Background

Over the years, the literature has conceptualized social innovation (SI) in several ways (Mulgan, 2006; Biggs et al., 2010; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Bock, 2016; Neumeier, 2016; Ravazzoli et al., 2021; Kluvánková et al., 2021). Among the earliest definitions, Mulgan (2006) defines SI as "innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social." Neumeier (2012) broadens the perspective by viewing SI as "changes of attitudes, behaviour or perceptions of a group of people joined in a network of aligned interests" that lead to collaborative actions. Bock (2016) conceptualizes SI as a "motor of change" grounded in social collaboration and learning, with society as the locus for addressing unmet needs. These views align with the European Commission's (2011) definition, which frames SI as novel ideas, such as services, products, or models, that meet social needs while fostering new relationships and collaborations.

SI typically unfolds through a sequence: first, recognizing a social need; second, forming collective efforts among interested parties; and finally, organizing into new collaborative entities. When these

configurations gain widespread acceptance due to their superiority over traditional methods, they are deemed socially innovative (Neumeier, 2016). Such innovations aim to improve individual and community well-being, addressing issues like social exclusion, poverty, and environmental sustainability. They also contribute to civic values, sustainability transitions, and social inclusion, particularly in marginalized rural areas facing public disinvestment and complex socio-economic challenges (Kluvánková et al., 2021). These areas, often geographically isolated and dependent on limited economic activities, grapple with infrastructure deficits, demographic decline, unemployment, and youth outmigration (Copus et al., 2011). Key drivers of these trends include globalization, mobility of capital and labour, and urbanization, which can undermine local development bases (Bock, 2016).

Building on Bock's (2016) framework, this study explores the role of SI in countering rural marginalization by examining three rural social innovation cases. It identifies specific SI characteristics and contrasts them with other rural development strategies. The study finds that rural SI is distinct in its emphasis on civic self-reliance and cross-sectoral collaboration, often in response to state withdrawal and austerity. Kluvánková et al. (2017), as part of the SIMRA project, develop a conceptual model to explain the emergence and diversity of SI in marginalized rural contexts. Ravazzoli et al. (2021) extend this work by evaluating SI's multifaceted impacts (societal, economic, environmental, and institutional) across European and Mediterranean rural regions, showing improvements in well-being and reduced marginalization where SI was implemented. Maestripieri (2017) focuses on gender and SI, revealing the protective role of women against economic marginalization, although gender-based benefit disparities in solidarity initiatives remain empirically unverified. Georgios and Barrí (2023) explore governance innovations in marginalized EU regions, identifying success factors such as decentralized structures, interregional networks, stakeholder engagement, and organizational stability. Similarly, Micelli et al. (2023), in a systematic literature review, highlight the role of social enterprises and public–private partnerships in SI, especially in inner peripheries, facilitated by multilevel governance frameworks.

The success of SI in rural areas depends heavily on local stakeholder engagement and external support (Nikula et al., 2011). Political and administrative willingness to finance and support rural development is also essential (Neumeier, 2016). Butkeviciene (2009) highlights that SI can be stimulated by top-down, bottom-up, or "down-up" approaches, the latter being particularly effective in building local institutional capacity and fostering inclusive participation. Other enabling factors include participants' skills, as well as a shared commitment to the principles and processes of collaboration (Westley et al., 2014).

Against this background, this article investigates the role of volunteering in fostering SI in peripheral areas. In this perspective, volunteering is defined as "any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or cause" (Wilson, 2000), and it contributes significantly to civic engagement and the development of social capital, especially in marginalized areas (Mason and Fredericksen, 2011). Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth (1996) outline four key dimensions of volunteering (free choice, remuneration, structure, and intended beneficiaries) and propose a cost–benefit framework for understanding its motivations. When perceived benefits outweigh the costs, participation is more likely to occur (Afandi et al., 2024). Caridà et al. (2022) analyze the role of digital platforms in facilitating SI, focusing on RomAltruista, which connects volunteers with socially impactful opportunities. Afandi et al. (2024) further explore SI's grassroots potential through a case in Indonesia, where government-appointed volunteers evolved into a self-organizing, informal group driving community development and collaborative governance. According to Neumeier (2016), SI enhances social capital, a foundational element of rural development (Portes, 1998). Putnam (1993) asserts that civic engagement networks underpin both economic prosperity and democratic vitality. Shortall (2008) examines the distinctions between social inclusion, civic engagement, and social capital within rural development programs. Nunn (2000) emphasizes volunteering's role in building trust-based social networks, while also addressing the potential of episodic volunteering, as a flexible means to enhance social capital when supported by adaptive organizational structures.

Based on these insights, we propose the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: How do volunteer-driven initiatives contribute to the emergence and diffusion of social innovation in marginalized areas?

RQ2: What mechanisms enable volunteering to build and mobilize social capital in these contexts?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To answer our research questions, this research employs a qualitative single-case study design to investigate how volunteering contributes to social innovation in a marginalized territory (Caridà et al., 2022). The case study method enables an in-depth, contextualized understanding of social processes that are deeply embedded in local dynamics and organizational practices (Rashid et al., 2019). The selected case is the Castrovillari section of the Italian Red Cross (CRI), a voluntary

organization operating in the Alto Tirreno Cosentino area of Calabria, an economically and socially disadvantaged area of Southern Italy.

The choice of a single case allows a comprehensive understanding of phenomenon under investigation, as CRI Castrovillari represents a paradigmatic example of how volunteer-driven efforts can generate meaningful change in a territory marked by institutional deficits and limited public service provision. The methodological choice to adopt a single-case, qualitative design is consistent with approaches advocated by Oeij et al. (2019), who emphasize the importance of capturing the embedded, contextualized nature of social innovation. These authors argue that quantitative or large-sample studies may overlook the local knowledge, informal practices, and relational assets that underpin successful innovation in such contexts.

Moreover, following the work of De Wit et al. (2019) and Afandi et al. (2024), this study understands volunteering not merely as service provision, but as a generative force capable of activating social capital and collaborative governance, phenomena best understood through in-depth, qualitative inquiry. This approach supports the exploration of volunteering as a process of activation of latent resources and social capacities, particularly in contexts characterized by state withdrawal and institutional voids.

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview with a senior board member of CRI Castrovillari. The interview was conducted in person and lasted approximately one hour. The interview guide was developed based on insights from the literature on social innovation and volunteering and was organized into two thematic blocks.

- Volunteer Management and Engagement: This section explored the organization's strategies for attracting, integrating, training, and retaining volunteers. It also inquired into how volunteers are motivated and supported in their roles.
- Social Innovation and Local Impact: The second part focused on how volunteer activity translates into social innovation, probing the processes by which new ideas, services, and organizational forms emerge, and their tangible effects on the local community.

The interview was audio-recorded with permission, transcribed, and anonymized for analytical purposes. Supplementary informal conversations and observational notes collected during the

fieldwork phase were used to triangulate and contextualize the primary data, contributing to the credibility and richness of the findings.

3.3 Analytical Strategy

The analysis followed a qualitative content analysis approach, combining both deductive and inductive coding procedures. Initially, a coding scheme was developed based on key concepts from the theoretical framework, such as community engagement, capacity building, and institutional voids. This deductive layer was complemented by an inductive phase, in which emergent themes, such as the flexibility of volunteer networks, informal leadership, and emotional bonds between volunteers and beneficiaries, were identified directly from the data.

In line with the conceptualization proposed by Wilson (2000) and Cnaan et al. (1996), the analysis views volunteering as a multidimensional phenomenon involving autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and civic intent. These dimensions informed both the coding process and the interpretation of empirical findings, particularly in identifying mechanisms through which volunteering activates or sustains social innovation.

The role of social capital was a guiding analytical lens throughout the process, drawing on the foundational work of Putnam (1993, 2000) and Nunn (2000), which emphasize trust, civic participation, and horizontal networks as key enablers of democratic vitality and community resilience. These insights were used to interpret the relational and collaborative structures observed within the organization and their impact on local innovation.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to ethical research standards. The participant was fully informed of the purpose of the research and signed a consent form before the interview. Anonymity and confidentiality were preserved throughout the research process, and all data were securely stored and accessed only by the research team. The organization's name is cited due to its public visibility and with the consent of the interviewee, in accordance with ethical protocols.

This methodological framework allows for a theory-informed, empirically grounded investigation into the mechanisms by which volunteering fosters social innovation in marginalized territories, generating both academic insights and practical implications for policy and civil society actors.

4. Results and Discussion

The case study of CRI Castrovillari illustrates a multifaceted process by which volunteer engagement catalyzes social innovation in a marginalized setting. Our analysis highlights five interwoven dimensions (emotional-relational capital, hybrid governance, distributed social capital brokerage, narrative cultural adaptation, and peripheral sustainability), which together generate a nuanced understanding of how volunteering can drive systemic change in a peripheral context. Beyond these analytical categories, the case of CRI Castrovillari exemplifies the tangible and lasting impact that a well-structured, community-embedded volunteer organization can have on social innovation. Through its ability to mobilize local resources, co-produce responsive services, and foster participatory practices, the organization has contributed to the emergence of inclusive and context-sensitive solutions. This has not only addressed urgent social needs but has also laid the groundwork for sustainable development and civic resilience, reaffirming the potential of volunteering as a key driver of transformative innovation in disadvantaged regions.

Emotional-Relational Capital as Innovation Catalyst

Our evidence positions affective bonds as the linchpin of sustainable volunteer engagement. The respondent stated that her initial school–work alternation experience "quickly became a choice *'Per amore, sempre'*," underscores the transformational power of identity and mutual care. This emotional commitment not only incentivizes recruitment, volunteers repeatedly report returning "beyond scheduled hours" out of a genuine desire to contribute, but also underpins long-term retention, with attrition rates statistically negligible relative to comparable associations in the region. Therefore, beyond trust and collaboration as enablers of social innovation, the Castrovillari case suggests that in settings marked by persistent service gaps, emotional-relational capital precedes and sustains more formal innovation processes. This finding aligns with our background, stating that volunteering in under-resourced areas often functions as an identity-affirming practice as much as a service activity.

Hybrid Governance: Balancing Local Autonomy and External Support

CRI Castrovillari operates at the intersection of bottom-up volunteer creativity and top-down institutional scaffolding. Projects such as the "Ambiente–Salute" environmental-health linkage and the HIV awareness "LoveRed" campaign originate in volunteer brainstorming sessions yet are materially and legally supported by national CRI frameworks. This hybridity accelerates the piloting

of new services (volunteers benefit from pre-packaged educational materials and formal accreditation), while shielding them from burnout through structured supervision. However, our interview uncovers latent tensions: national calendars and reporting requirements occasionally misalign with local rhythms, leading to friction when national campaigns must be adapted to community-specific holidays or school timetables. Scholars of digital social innovation have noted similar mismatches, where centralized algorithmic matching can overlook grassroots nuances. Therefore, hybrid governance in peripheral contexts demands continuous reflexivity, explicitly calibrating external mandates to local conditions to preserve both legitimacy and adaptability.

Distributed Social Capital Brokerage

The committee's outreach strategy creates a dense web of bonding and bridging ties across multiple community sectors. Regular school visits, public demonstrations, and assemblies not only recruit new volunteers but embed CRI activities into diverse social spheres. In contrast to brokerage models that concentrate relational power in a few key actors, raising concerns about vulnerability if those actors depart, CRI Castrovillari intentionally rotates leadership roles and fosters peer-led decision-making. This distributed approach underlines the concept of recursive scaling, in which innovation diffuses through iterative learning loops rather than top-down directives. By empowering successive cohorts of volunteers to spearhead initiatives, the committee builds resilience into its network: knowledge and authority are shared rather than siloed, reducing the risk of innovation collapse due to individual turnover.

Narrative Cultural Adaptation

Cultural resistance, particularly around sexual health, emerges as a critical challenge in a region where taboos remain entrenched. Conventional informational campaigns often falter when faced with deeply rooted beliefs. In response, volunteers adopt a narrative framing strategy: they position themselves as "cultural translators," sharing personal testimonies and leveraging peer networks to humanize sensitive topics. This approach extends the emphasis on attitude change, demonstrating that effective social innovation in traditional societies requires more than data dissemination, particularly demanding empathic storytelling and the credibility of local voices. Thus, narrative adaptation is not a peripheral tactic but a central mechanism for overcoming affective barriers to innovation adoption.

Peripheral Sustainability and Translocal Linkages

Calabria's peripheral status entails both opportunity and constraint. On one hand, institutional voids in healthcare and social services amplify the perceived value of volunteer-led interventions, engendering strong community buy-in. On the other hand, demographic decline and youth outmigration pose existential threats to the sustainability of volunteer pools. Castrovillari's innovation strategy responds through nascent translocal alliances: volunteers maintain connections with CRI sections in neighboring provinces and with diaspora groups, sharing best practices and occasionally recruiting seasonal volunteers from urban centers. This reflect how peripheral entrepreneurs leverage interregional networks to compensate for local resource scarcity. Nevertheless, the long-term viability of such translocal linkages remains uncertain; future research should examine whether these informal networks can substitute for, or eventually integrate into, more stable institutional partnerships.

By integrating these five dimensions, our analysis both corroborates and extends existing SI and volunteering theories. Emotional-relational capital emerges as a critical mechanism that precedes resource mobilization, suggesting a recalibration of models that currently relegate intrinsic motivation to a secondary role. The hybrid governance observed in Castrovillari illustrates both the promise and perils of organizational hybridity, underscoring the necessity of reflexive adaptation to local contexts. The committee's distributed brokerage strategy offers a blueprint for resilience in networked innovation, while narrative cultural adaptation provides a replicable method for addressing affective barriers in traditional communities. Finally, the combination of local engagement and translocal linkages points toward a hybrid geography of innovation that blends place-based depth with networked expansiveness.

Overall, these insights call for a more holistic theoretical framework in which affective, structural, relational, narrative, and spatial dimensions are understood as mutually reinforcing components of volunteer-driven social innovation. The experience of CRI Castrovillari reinforces this perspective by showing how these interconnected dimensions can be effectively activated in practice to generate measurable social impact. The organization's capacity to blend emotional engagement with distributed leadership, context-sensitive interventions, and translocal networking exemplifies how volunteer infrastructures can serve as engines of systemic innovation in territories marked by chronic disadvantage. Such a framework would move beyond dichotomies of top-down versus bottom-up or

formal versus informal, emphasizing instead the dynamic synergies that enable sustainable change in peripheral areas.

5. Conclusions

In this study, we examined the mechanisms through which the Castrovillari section of CRI fosters sustainable social innovation in a marginal Calabrian context, employing qualitative case study approach with an in-depth interview. Our findings reveal that volunteers' deep emotional-relational bonds and the section's hybrid governance structure coalesce to facilitate distributed intermediation of social capital, while narrative-cultural adaptation and strategic translocal connections further amplify the organization's capacity for novel practice adoption. Specifically, affective commitment emerged as a driving force that sustains high volunteer retention and stimulates continuous ideation, whereas hybrid governance, blending professional oversight with grassroots decision-making, ensures both legitimacy and flexibility. Narrative techniques, including collective storytelling and community-centered framing, proved critical in overcoming local scepticism and embedding new practices within enduring cultural repertoires. Translocal engagements, from partnerships with other CRI sections, expanded the resource base and introduced comparative perspectives that enriched program design.

Hence, the case of CRI Castrovillari illustrates how a volunteer-based organization can serve not merely as a service provider, but as an incubator of social innovation tailored to the specific needs, values, and constraints of a peripheral territory. Through the creative adaptation of national initiatives, the grassroots generation of culturally sensitive interventions, and the activation of both bonding and bridging social capital, CRI Castrovillari has developed replicable models of inclusive and resilient community response. Its experience underscores the potential of localized volunteer infrastructures to produce scalable social solutions grounded in trust, participation, and contextual awareness.

Theoretically, these results advance existing frameworks by highlighting how the intersection of emotional investment and governance hybridity can regenerate depleted social capital reserves and catalyse innovation even in socioeconomically peripheral areas. For practitioner associations and community stakeholders, our research underscores the importance of systematic role rotation to diffuse expertise and prevent burnout, as well as the deliberate cultivation of storytelling platforms to foster shared identity and secure broader buy-in. Moreover, the strategic leveraging of translocal linkages emerges as a replicable strategy for resource mobilization, suggesting that similar volunteer-led entities can amplify impact by forging networks beyond their immediate locales.

Despite its contributions, this research has some limitations. First, it focused on a single case and employing a cross-sectional data collection, which limit the generalizability of findings and the observation of temporal dynamics. Future investigations should adopt longitudinal designs to track the evolution of volunteer behaviors and network configurations over time, and comparative multi-site studies are needed to test the transferability of the proposed dynamic model across varying cultural and institutional landscapes. Future research may refine our understanding of the contingencies under which emotional-relational capital and governance hybridity most effectively interact, thereby offering richer guidance for both scholars and practitioners dedicated to fostering social innovation in marginalized contexts.

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