



International Journal of Community Currency Research

VOLUME 30 No.1 (2026) 214-225

AGENCY AND PARTICIPATION AS MEANS OF
STRENGTHENING TERRITORIES.

A CASE STUDY AMONG THE YOUNG MEMBERS OF TWO
CREDIT COOPERATIVE BANKS

Alba Francesca Canta¹

1 Fellow researcher, Polytechnic of Turin, alba.canta@polito.it

ABSTRACT:

In the 1940s, growing awareness of economic development's limitations sparked a broader, multidimensional approach to well-being — one incorporating cultural, social, and educational dimensions. This shift introduced new values such as solidarity, democratic participation, and individual freedom, alongside practical tools like microcredit and Credit Cooperative Banks (CCBs) designed to foster social integration and community well-being. Central to CCBs is the principle of territoriality: cooperative banks must collect and invest resources within their local territory, serving a geographically defined membership. This grounds their mission in strengthening community bonds and pursuing economically and socially sustainable development. To operationalize this principle, some Italian CCBs established groups of Young Members organized into Territorial praesidia, each representing a specific area the bank serves. Empirical research conducted in Italy between 2022 and 2023 explored how CCBs and these youth groups enact territorial principles in practice. Using qualitative methods — including interviews with key informants and observational participation — two case studies were examined: the CCB of Rome and the CCB of Ravennate. Findings confirm the territorial principle's centrality for both institutions and young members, highlighting how these youth groups serve as a transformative resource, bridging banks and local communities despite significant challenges.

KEYWORDS:

Microcredit; Credit Cooperative Banks; Italy; Youth; Participation

To cite this article: Canta, F. (2026). 'Agency and participation as means of strengthening territories. A case study among the young members of two Credit Cooperative Banks' INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY CURRENCY RESEARCH VOLUME 30 No.1 (214-225); www.ijccr.net; ISSN 3106-0781; DOI <https://doi.org/10.26034/zh.ijccr.2026.9561>

2. INTRODUCTION

In various disciplines, the role of culture has been established. Indeed, cultural processes and forms of habitus (Bourdieu, 1980) generate distinctions among social groups and institutions and help explain their origins and evolution. Also in the economic sphere, it is possible to analyse the organisations by considering the cultural origin that determined their birth and transformation. Among the various organisations that have taken shape over time, one such institution is money (Simmel, 1900), which in modern society has increasingly shaped relations between people. These cultural practices organised around money have come to function as the primary measure of value. However, with changing socio-historical conditions we observed a contextual metamorphosis of economic processes that has led to different paradigms based on distinct cultural assumptions. The first is economic, focused on monetary and material wealth. The second is development, based on people, their agency, and their ability to own resources and use them freely.

The agency represents one of the main essential components that make-up development processes and it can be considered as the opportunity to be active change-makers and foster personal and communitarian multidimensional well-being.

One of the possible expressions of agency concerns participation, which represents an essential vehicle for social and economic integration. According to a new cultural logic based on values such as solidarity, inclusion, and participation, new practices and tools have arisen. They have made economic participation a principal vehicle for social integration and for the well-being of marginalised groups. Among these is microcredit (see Section 1), an educational instrument that fosters economic and social participation and promotes multidimensional well-being and development, despite ongoing challenges. Underlying this tool is the realisation that simply providing people with economic resources does not necessarily lead to development, as some empirical research have showed (ILO 2019): it is also necessary to work on specific social and educational practices that foster or limit freedom depending on the context considered (Accorinti 2005).

The logic of microcredit gave rise to cooperative organisations that continue to use the same instrument to this day, including Credit Cooperative Banks (now CCBs) discussed in Section 2. In the words of Giuseppe Toniolo (2012), these banks «fit well into the conception of an economy at the service» of human beings and still represent a valid alternative to the commercial system on an international level. Grounded in the values that constitute their social capital, CCBs have sought to operationalize the principles of cooperation, democracy, and territorial embeddedness, while making individual and community autonomy central to their activities. One of the core principles of CCBs is territoriality: cooperative banks are required to raise and invest funds within their local area and to limit membership to that area. The objective is to foster the strengthening of community relations for a development that aims to be economically and socially sustainable. A key factor in these banks' endurance is the implicit social contract with their home territory and, by extension, the community.

Given the importance of the territorial principle for both the CCBs and their members, an empirical sociological study was conducted. Part of this study will be presented in Section 3 with the aim to highlight how this principle is implemented by Italian CCBs and the role played by young members in relation to the territory¹. The case studies are represented by the CCB of Rome and the CCB of Ravennate, delving into the study of two groups of young members established in the banks: the Laboratory in the former and the Young Members Committee in the latter. Using a qualitative methodology, between 2022 and 2023, empirical research within the two groups of young members was conducted trying to understand if and how young members interiorize the principle of territory and if they can pose as a territorial resources through their participation (see Section 3a). As evidenced by semi-structured interviews and participant observation (see Section 3b), young members - who constitute the bank's future organizational and cultural resource - engage with the local area through their participation. They embody the bank's link to its context, despite ongoing difficulties, as can be seen in the next sections.

3. THE BEGINNINGS OF PARTICIPATION: MICROCREDIT FOR TERRITORIAL AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Agency and participation have been much-discussed topics in various fields of study, including economics and sociology. Often not considered essential, participation has frequently been demanded by people, as demonstrated by the various protests that have taken place over time (Olabisi et al, 2021). As Arnstein (2007) said, genuine

citizen participation in democratic processes requires a redistribution of power; without such redistribution - whether of financial resources or decision-making authority - no real change can occur. The issue of participation, incidentally, is not new and has its roots in a past that sought to put people and their necessary involvement in organizations and society back at the center of the discourse.

The exclusion of people, for example, has long been a key factor in the organization of economic institutions and society in general. Recognising that a fair society cannot exist without attending to people's needs, new paradigms and methods of organising finance have gradually emerged to support the multidimensional development of society as a whole (Baccini et al. 2021). An example is microcredit, which originated and flourished first in developing countries thanks to the work of Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank, and has now become a key tool even for the most industrialized societies, in which it has been institutionalized and is one of the main activities of some banking organizations both at national and international level.

Originating from social rather than economic issues, microcredit has become representative of a cultural and social dynamic that no longer sees the economic sphere as separate from the social ones but seeks to restore the ancient link between the two. It is not possible, in fact, to isolate social issues from economic ones, since economic institutions are shaped and take form according to specific cultural processes that guide their actions and results.

Various studies on microcredit have confirmed its crucial role in combating poverty, achieving multidimensional well-being, and acquiring certain life chances² (Dahrendorf 2005). Both in less developed countries (ILO 2015; Kato, Kratzer 2013) and in more industrialized ones (EMN 2019), microcredit has been beneficial in several ways and has been a tool, respectively, for the empowerment of women and the social inclusion of men and women, helping to improve the ability to mobilize the resources of small savers to finance projects of high social value (Becchetti 2008). While a neoclassical approach emphasizes the importance of material economic outcomes in people's lives, the success of microcredit comprises two components: a visible one, measurable in concrete results, and an invisible one, less immediately perceptible, linked to the means used to achieve them. These means simultaneously affect both the happiness and the productive effectiveness of the project, as well as the market success of the goods and services created. Thus, a series of value and relational processes are set in motion that affect the lives of all people and the country's economy (Ibidem).

Microcredit has therefore been defined as a possible tool for eradicating and defeating poverty, generating social and gender inclusion, and rebuilding today's society on solidarity, cooperation, and happiness (Fumagalli et al. 2018; Rizza 2018; Zamagni 2018). Despite the different forms it takes in different countries, all microcredit projects share deep roots that recall the solidarity practiced by the poorest people, who relied on the community to overcome problems that the state did not address. What makes microcredit so important is not only the loan component, clearly fundamental in people's lives, but above all participatory logic adopted, which gives rise to considerably wider social consequences: the fact that someone trusts in the abilities of people who have been excluded, and the fact that they can handle money for the first time, triggers a mechanism of generative self-esteem in the minds of these people (Yunus 2010). By contrast, the cultural logic that produced exclusionary organisations has marginalised the most vulnerable, leading them to believe that their condition stems from their own failure as human beings.

Microcredit, therefore, could have a twofold implication: 1) it could be a tool for participatory democracy and poverty reduction, capable of acting and finding resources outside traditional financial circuits; 2) it could stimulate and promote human development and well-being (Barbieri 2006), if used in combination with other tools and despite the difficulties. An inclusive financial system, as a new instrument of responsible welfare, must first reshape a broad and complex cultural order - rooted in centuries of history - so as to foster a transition to a responsibility-oriented logic (Baccini 2021). Responsible welfare is proposed as an alternative to the current social protection system, seeking to respond more effectively to the old and new needs of the community. This system has three fundamental corollaries: the centrality of the person, the responsibility, and the meso-dimension (the community of reference) as the privileged place for its implementation. Some organizations, as we will see in the next section, have internalized the three pillars and have sought to make them the central foundations, trying to ground a more participatory and inclusive culture.

4. AN OLD-NEW INVOLVEMENT: COOPERATIVE CREDIT BANKS AND THE LOCAL AREA

The experience of microcredit as a tool for combating multidimensional poverty and promoting active participation allows us to make some important observations: in promoting the societal and personal development, economic capital plays an important role, but it is not enough. We need to consider all the factors that affect human development and the basic principles that enable it to happen. Among these is active democratic participation, on which the cooperative system is founded.

Among the institutionalised forms of microcredit that have developed over time is the cooperative movement, based on «the agency of individuals and their communities, involving people not only as bearers of needs but also as part of the solution to problems» (Azzi 2005, p. 21). Within the cooperative movement, we find the Italian Credit Cooperative Banks (CCBs), created at a time of hard exclusion to offer economic and social instruments different from those of a capitalist nature. Seeking to embody the principles of the Civil Economy and organizing their entire activity around the maxim *homo homini natura amicus*, these cooperative banks were born precisely from the logic of microcredit and still organize their activities around it today. For this reason, they represent a large slice of the economic and financial market in several countries and a valid alternative to the traditional capitalist system in many local communities (EACB 2018).

For example, one of the first forms of cooperativism emerged in 1844 with the birth of the first cooperative enterprise in Rochdale (England) when a group of textile workers pooled together their resources and organized the sale of basic needs to their members at lower prices. That group of people believed in the need to give individuals and families a dignified life and relied on the strength of the cooperative enterprise as a tool for help and emancipation. Starting from this small workers' experiment, the cooperative movement spread all over the countries and provided powerful support for farmers, artisans, and small entrepreneurs (Grignaschi, Puccinelli, 2009; McKillop et al., 2020). From this experience, in 1849, credit cooperation spread thanks to the work of Friedrich W. Raiffeisen, founder of the first German rural credit union, which then inspired the Italian one founded in Loreggia in 1883 by Leone Wollemborg. This tradition, albeit in a more institutionalized form, continues today in Italian CCBs. Currently, cooperative banks' microcredit interventions take different forms and are delivered through three main instruments: 1) economic resources, the result of community savings and an important economic driver; 2) financial education, which increases knowledge, analytical skills, and awareness of one's choices; 3) professional support, to ensure that the intervention becomes a social multiplier and a tool for empowerment. The channels through which CCB interventions operate are manifold and involve collaboration with dioceses, Caritas, anti-usury foundations, credit guarantee consortia, local authorities, the European Investment Fund, and voluntary associations. Several framework agreements have also been signed with the Ente Nazionale del Microcredito (ENM), the Consiglio Nazionale dell'Ordine dei Consulenti del Lavoro (CNO), and the Consiglio Nazionale dell'Ordine dei Dottori Commercialisti e degli Esperti Contabili (CNDCEC) to promote the positive outcome of their interventions. At the international level, these banks have also sought to export its microfinance model, for example in Ecuador³, and to create a virtuous circle of civil economy through the involvement of local communities. Although this process may seem typically neo-colonialist (Barbieri 2006), through a mechanism of knowledge, integration, and respect for local areas, the results have been positive thanks to a microfinance system.

Although today there is no single cooperative banking model in the world, one can identify characteristics and dimensions of social capital (Putnam 2000; Granovetter 1973) that connect these organisations: they are summarised in the Charter of Cooperative Credit Values and include the principle of self-help, cooperation between cooperatives, mutuality and territoriality, and democracy. In this contribution, we have focused on the principle of territoriality: since their origins, CCBs have been and continue to be the expression of communities, people, and territories that organize themselves to produce social capital of solidarity and reciprocity through credit services for the promotion of economic, cultural, and social growth (Diana, Troisi 2012; EACB 2018).

Despite the challenges that the principles of mutuality⁴ and territoriality bring with them (Troisi & Nese, 2012), several empirical studies highlight the positive effects that their concrete application can have on many aspects. A study conducted in Italy during the pandemic (Fiordelisi 2021) showed how mutuality and territorial rootedness make these banks more resilient, especially in times of crisis. Similarly, other analyses (Sfar et al. 2016; McKillop et al. 2020) have shown how territorial proximity and more intimate relations between the members and the bank facilitate the collection of soft information⁵, create more lasting, widespread trust, and reduce income inequalities, although the outcome also depends on the context in which the CCBs are set (Battaglia et al. 2010). Again, there is a

positive link between localism and horizontal cooperative management (Uzzi 1999) expressed in a stronger relationship between bank and customers or/and members and in an ability to attract new customers due to the distinctive characteristics of cooperative credit.

Other studies (Bobbio et al. 2022; Rossignoli, Rotondi 2022), at the same time, showed that the presence of CCBs generates social capital. Bobbio et al. (2022) highlight that, thanks to their spatial and non-spatial proximity, the presence of these banks has a positive impact on social capital measured as an index of generativity in action⁶, especially in contexts characterized by economic and labor fragility: their proximity to all the actors of society allows the banks to create dynamic community generativity (Ibidem) capable of affecting the social, economic and cultural fabric of the territory. According to other research (Murro, Peruzzi 2020), it is precisely territorial proximity that allows CCBs to reduce income inequalities and, therefore, generate social capital: for example, in Italy, cooperative banks are the only banking presence in 641 small municipalities, 80% of which with less than five thousand inhabitants and over 50% in disadvantaged areas (Ibidem).

Despite the challenges associated with territoriality, the banks' local embeddedness, mutuality and effective governance provide stability. The common thread is trust, a cornerstone of cooperative social capital and now recognised as an economic driver. At the same time, trust generates stronger relationships between CCBs and their communities, between banks and their members, and between members themselves, leading to a better banking result. Trust can, in fact, have a positive impact on member satisfaction, their way of working, and their commitment to remaining in the cooperative (Hansen et al. 2002). However, this generative process requires that all parties recognize, first, that the organization works for the local area and, second, that they themselves are regarded as an expression of that context.

With this objective in mind, some Italian CCBs, following a national directive, have created groups of young members aged between 18 and 35 or 40 with the primary aim of creating a community capable of engaging youth, listening to those young people who are expression of the territory, ensuring the continuity of the banking model and building an intergenerational community.

In this sense, youth involvement is fundamental for their innovative flair, and this is why many CCBs have committed themselves to this front, since it is essential that young people have the opportunity to participate in programs that directly affect their lives and learn from them (Rocha 1997). A further essential objective is to implement dialogue with young people and improve the relationship between the membership and the territory. In addition to the internal mutuality (towards members), the external mutuality (towards the territory), and the network mutuality (between the whole cooperative system) already promoted by cooperative banks, through these groups they have created a new form of mutuality: the intergenerational one (Checkoway 2011).

Many changes within CCBs, and consequently in the regions, have taken place precisely thanks to the young people who, over time, have sought to reduce the distance existing with the top management. Considering, therefore, young people as an essential cultural resource in organizations and societies, CCBs have sought to implement a future-oriented social transformation by strengthening the territorial bounds (ECRA 2011).

5. CASE STUDY: PARTICIPATION AND TERRITORY AMONG YOUNG MEMBERS OF CCBS

5.1 *Hypothesis, questions and methodology*

Given the crucial sociological value that young members represent in cooperative credit banks as a resource for strengthening ties with the local community, empirical research was conducted between 2022 and 2023 with the main objective of investigating 1) how Italian CCBs implement the principles of mutuality and territoriality through their young members and 2) whether they act as a resource for social transformation in their local communities. This study is part of a broader sociological research aimed at investigating the type of participation promoted in CCBs among young members and the possible interiorization of certain values promoted by the bank itself, including that of territoriality. This involved examining the type of participation promoted within youth groups, their profile, albeit not from a purely economic perspective — and their relationship with the bank and the local community. The Charter of Values of Cooperative Credit refers to two essential articles on participation: Article 4 'Promotion of participation' among members, families, and small businesses in cooperative life, and Article 12 'Young People' for the enhancement of youth participation through the establishment of Young Members Groups

(now YM Groups), constant dialogue, and «supporting them in the dissemination and implementation of the principles of credit cooperation». In addition, Article 6 expressly refers to «promoting the well-being of members and the local area, which the Cooperative Credit system serves»⁷.

After mapping the Italian cooperative banks, the Young Members Laboratory in the CCB of Rome (Centre), and the Young Members Committee in the CCB of Ravennate (North) were chosen. Both groups are composed of around 10-12 people from 18 to 35/40 years old, chosen by the Board of Directors for 1) their representativeness of the activities and cooperative world in the territory, and 2) the possible tradition of relations with the CCBs, as will be explained in more detail in the next section. The research questions, among others, were: How do the two CCBs and groups of young members put into practice the principles of territoriality? Do the young members of the two groups internalize this principle and stand as a socially transformative territorial resource? The hypothesis is that there must be an identification of the members of a group with the principles promoted. According to empirical studies, members' identification with cooperative values and with the group is associated with higher levels of mutual trust - both among members and between members and the bank - and facilitates more effective organisational management, though outcomes remain contingent on multiple factors⁸ (Putnam 2000; Sabatini et al. 2014; Bauer et al. 2019).

To corroborate the research hypotheses and answer the two research questions, a qualitative methodology was used (Delli Zotti 2021). After outlining the frame of reference through the analysis of secondary sources, the following were used: 1) two semi-structured interviews with the Supervisor of the two groups, to understand the functioning, the main objectives of the group, and how the principle of territoriality is concretized through the young people; 2) Nine semi-structured interviews with the youth of the Laboratory (n. 5) and of the Committee (n. 4), to understand how they have internalized the territorial principle and how they relate to the territory; 3) brief participant observation at seven events for each bank to observe the type of territorial events promoted by the two banks chosen, the involvement of young people, and their role in the territory.

5.2 Youth as bridging capital for the territory: some results

The analysis of the interviews revealed some remarkable results that define the connection between the cooperative bank and its territory. Within this link, the young people of the Laboratory and the Committee play an essential role.

The structure of the two YM groups already shows how the principle of territoriality is implemented by both banks considered in the research. The two banks created six Territorial Praesidia, representative of the areas covered: the CCB of Rome covers the areas of North Rome, Rome and Province, South Rome, West Veneto, East Veneto, and Molise-Abruzzo, while the CCB of Ravennate covers Faenza, Ravenna, Lugo, Imola, Forlì, and Cesena.

The first aim of the territorial Praesidia is to consider the diversity of needs of the areas covered by the banks through the voice and actions of the young members. When the Laboratory and the Committee arose - around 2010 - the groups were not divided into Territorial praesidia, and a single central directorate proposed events throughout the territory. Nevertheless, although there may be geographical proximity between some areas, there is not necessarily a proximity of needs. Big differences between small and large contexts or within the same city can be found: for example, the CCB in Rome includes very multifaceted dimensions and is fragmented and eclectic, requiring different ad hoc strategies, as the supervisor of the group highlights: «We started with one central board that proposed ideas and tried to organise events. In 2018, I created the territorial praesidia because we no longer wanted there to be a central council that would drop events on the territory from Rome, but we wanted the young people in the territory to tell us what the trends, needs, and activities were and to propose events (that they desired to organise)».

Each Presidium consists of one or two young people, making a total of around 10 or 12 youth for each YM Group. These youth are chosen to join the group by the Board of Directors on the basis of specific characteristics: 1) the status of bank members, 2) the age (18-35 in Romagna and 18-40 in Roman ones), and 3) their representativeness of the cooperative context and the activities most prevalent in the area. This means that the young people chosen - and interviewed - work in cooperative or similar companies and presumably have a family tradition of cooperation and a long-standing relationship with the BCC, which in some cases contributed to the creation of these cooperatives

and in others collaborated with them. From this alone, it can be seen how relationships and territoriality are interrelated in the cooperative world.

Although the economic profile of these young people and their relationship with the bank from a financial point of view have not been explored in depth, they are customers and members of their local CCB and almost all belong to a family of BCC members. The banks have their strategy of recruiting young people on the basis of specific characteristics, including the relationship. This strategy appears to be both at odds with and in line with the new guidelines of the European Central Bank, according to which other specific qualifications are required to move from the YM group to the board of directors. Nevertheless, as one group supervisor points out, this means that «There is a risk of losing some of what is actually the closest link with the territory where, especially for our type of social base, it is not certain that representatives of broader categories such as agriculture, crafts, or commerce have all the requirements for the board of directors».

Despite these difficulties, young people are establishing a solid relationship between the bank and their local areas and are playing a leading role in this regard, while respecting the territorial diversity they live in. As their experiences show: «Participating in the youth group was an opportunity to get to know the other guys of my territory, which is quite diverse and goes from the whole province of L'Aquila to Molise; so, despite being very similar, each territory has its own characteristics! That is why I always say to the young people: "You must give me an input because you know areas which I do not know," and each territory can have its needs» (G, CCB of Rome). «(We are trying to understand) what the territory wants and what activities we can make happen today. This answer is bigger in the small territories outside the big city; in the big city, this type of relationship is more difficult: either you have a great influence on the territory, or you can only focus on certain areas, as we do» (M, CCB of Rome).

Although the intention was to divide the territory to facilitate connections, the interviews revealed the difficulty of keeping the various Territorial Presidia together: they often do not communicate with each other and are fragmented and autonomous. Brief participatory observation revealed, for example, that the First Conference of Territorial Presidents of the CCBs of Rome was only organized in 2022 on the recommendation of Federcasce, the national association that brings together all CCBs and has representative and protective functions, and Federlus, the local federation of Lazio, Umbria, and Sardinia, of which the CCB of Rome is a member. The conference, entitled 'Opportunities and challenges for young members of the CCBs of Rome', was aimed at young members of the six Territorial Praesidia of the Laboratory and had the objective of officially introducing the young people who were part of it. The latter had never met before and, in this regard, they emphasized: «Many of us did not know each other and could not collaborate. We must keep in touch» (L, BCC of Rome), confirming the difficulties that a vast territory such as Rome entails. In this purpose, the Roman bank is committed to constantly organizing Young Members' Meetings divided by Territorial Presidia to strengthen relations with and between the various presidia, and therefore with young people and the areas of reference. In this regard, three meetings were held on May 10, 17, and 24 2022 with the permission to attend them as a researcher and observe the dynamics.

However, despite some difficulties, participation in the Laboratory and Committee is seen by the young people as an essential opportunity for various reasons.

Firstly, the interviewees highlighted the importance of participation in the group and banks for knowing, valuing, and rediscovering their context. One of the primary tasks carried out by both groups is to implement the national provisions in the territory. To this end, the groups organize specific events in their contexts: they take place approximately every four months and focus on the knowledge of local realities, organization of cultural activities, and sustainable financial education.

The latter was considered essential by the banks and young people and aims 1) to educate the youth to be financially, socially, and environmentally responsible, and 2) to make young people aware of the various tools CCB makes available to enable them to stay in the territory. In the event "Rest to the South and Mutui Consap: New opportunities for young people", held in Abruzzo on 28.05.2022 and organized with the collaboration of Invitalia, for example, initiatives and funding opportunities have been presented to young members who want to stay in the South and be an active resource for the territory. The "voice" of some young members enriched the event: their spontaneous first-hand accounts highlighted the importance of placing trust in young people in the area who feel the need to have all the tools they need to stay.

These events are accompanied by others of a different kind. Even during the pandemic, a series of meetings were often organized in middle and high schools with the aim of raising awareness among young people on specific issues - such as cyberbullying - or on financial education, rather than providing guidance for more informed choices after school or presenting the local reality. These activities are complemented by additional recreational and cultural activities, which vary by area: discovering local excellence, visits to local cooperatives, cultural visits, meetings with university students to explore specific topics, dinners by the sea, and walks to historical sites. What all the meetings share is the involvement of both the YM Groups' youth and, above all, the local community, with the aim of strengthening the bond between the community and the territory. The two groups also organize events: 1) at the regional level, with geographically closer banks, organizing financial education or recreational events, 2) at the national level by participating, among others, in local forums and events, and 3) at the federation level creating collaboration and projects. For example, at the prompting of the Emilia-Romagna Federation, CCB Ravennate has initiated a mentoring process for other banks in the area with the aim of creating additional groups of young members and contributing to the prosperity of the local areas. The events are organized in collaboration with local entities like churches, Caritas, cooperatives, foundations, and many others. This is further evidence of dense local ties that build strong bridging social capital, understood as the resources that generate relationships across groups and with the broader community, thereby strengthening local and community identity (Putnam 2000).

Another crucial element that young people mentioned during the interviews is the importance of these events for sharing objectives and ideas within the group, but also, and above all, for creating a strong local network. When asked in the interview "Do you think that participating in the group and in the bank gives your life a deeper meaning?" many young people emphasized the opportunity to contribute to the communitarian well-being and to the growth of the local area. In addition, the value of cooperation in creating a network with the various local social actors was pointed out.

«Is knowledge of the territory a value? Because it has helped me to know many realities, even within my region that I might not know, despite being a few kilometres from me. I feel much more connected to my territory thanks to this experience of the committee» (S, CCB Ravennate).

«I believe that my experience in banking has been very important because it has given me the opportunity to reflect on what an ethical approach to the world of work might be. I am an entrepreneur, and I manage several companies. I was able to interact with administrators who manage a huge organization. I saw that it is possible to do business ethically and also saw how gathering experiences, advice, and suggestions from those who have done it and are doing it is useful to me» (S, BCC Ravennate).

Or, as another young member of the Laboratory states: «Above all, the value of cooperation is a very important principle in life because I am realizing that issues related to globalization are causing us to lose many local values. My family comes from the agricultural world, so we are very attached to the land, and I carry this family know-how with me, which always pushes me to have shared relationships with people; so for me now, cooperating and working with others is fundamental... I am seeing this both in the BCC, where it is obviously in the statute, so for them it is the vital principle for moving forward, and it is obviously helping me to meet new people and get to know important professionals».

As these interviews show, young people who actively participate in the events and life of the bank become the focus of local initiatives. At the same time, young people's opportunity to organize local activities makes them the driving force behind local change, giving them a transformative role. In this way, they are invested with the power necessary to become informed citizens who are truly drivers of change (Arnstein 2007). Despite the difficulties and limitations identified in both BCCs, the young people from the Laboratory and the Committee interviewed take on the role of social innovators at the local level, giving substance to the principles of mutuality and territoriality dear to the cooperative movement (Launio, Sotelo 2021) and strengthening the link between BCCs and their local areas. When asked "In your opinion, how does your bank relate to the local community?" some of them replied: «Participating in the bank and the group makes you understand more about what the bank does for the territory. I am very involved in the diocese, and I found that without the bank, the diocese would not exist in Faenza; at least the initiatives would not be there and encourages you to participate and let you know what they do. I would say that also makes you feel maybe even a little more responsible for the community» (G, CCB Ravennate).

Participation, awareness, local ties, and networking seem to emerge as essential elements in this reciprocal relationship between BCCs and the young members who participate in them. On the one hand, these banks act as a link between young people and the local area, with young people talking about 'belonging' to it; on the other hand, it is the young people themselves who, by acquiring participatory power, act as active citizens in the relationship between the bank and the local area (Arnstein 2007).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The integration of qualitative research tools used in this survey has revealed some interesting aspects regarding the ways in which the principle of territoriality is implemented by CCBs and the involvement of young people as essential territorial and cultural resources. One of the key principles that composes the social capital of Italian CCBs, as outlined in the Charter of Cooperative Credit Values, specifically pertains to the organization of events and the development of suitable tools to redistribute participatory power to the relevant community. One of these tools involved the establishment of groups of young members who, in accordance with Articles 4 and 12 of the Charter of Values, represent an essential transformative, cultural, and organizational resource for banking and social renewal.

Thanks to their participatory and cooperative origins, Italian banks are working with young people - and not only - to build intergenerational mutuality. This is based on their active participation, since they represent the future. CCBs are organized using an *ad includendum* logic: their origins rest on the strength of relationships and the value of people for their abilities, not their possessions. On this basis, they developed financial and economic tools rooted in different values from the traditional economy, such as the microcredit and microfinance system, which empower people economically and socially (Rocha 1997). Both microcredit and microfinance as other processes of these banks are based on the territoriality and mutuality. For this reason, a qualitative study was conducted in two banks, those of Rome and Ravennate with the aim of exploring how these principles are implemented and how young members serve as a resource to strengthen the link between the bank and the territory.

The first key step for the CCBs was to form groups of young members tasked with serving as a transformative resource for the bank and territory. They listen to the needs of their peers and strengthen the link with their reference areas. Young members selected for these groups have specific characteristics: they live in the territory, know it well, and represent its main activities. The second tool was the creation of Territorial Presidia, established out of a desire to address the needs of different areas and create connections between territories, partly thanks to the young members.

As can be seen, youth involvement is essential for two reasons. Their participation in CCBs events offers a chance to rediscover and observe the territories with fresh perspectives. It also enables them to meet peers from entirely different areas within the banks. To this end, the banks organize events so Laboratory and Committee young members can become familiar with all financial and economic instruments available to them. This helps them stay in their area and fosters cooperation with local actors. Young people themselves also help enhance the territory and create new opportunities. One goal of the Laboratory and the Committee is to enable young people to organize local events, thereby strengthening relationships among residents. From the interviews and participant observation, cultural, recreational, and especially financial events emerge as the most commonly organized. These are based on the needs of young people and the local community and on the relationships built with local realities. This creates a process that fosters participation by banks, young people, community, and businesses. As the interviews show, this process helps young members internalize the most frequently cited principle: territoriality and mutuality. Of course, putting these principles into practice is not without challenges: it can depend on factors such as the wider community's interest or the willingness of young people and the bank. In the latter case, for example, not all the CCB have created a YM group. Moreover, it is not always easy to get the various Territorial Presidia or local entities engaged in dialogue. Nevertheless, despite the challenges, positive results and promising examples of territorial generativity can be observed in these two credit cooperative banks.

NOTES

1. As will be explained later, this study represents a small part of a broader sociological research project.
2. Dahrendorf (2005) defines the chances of life as a set of civil rights and opportunities for well-being and considers relevant those freedoms that create in turn chance of life through an active participation of subjects. According to Dahrendorf, it is also possible to build life opportunities only through a society open to dialogue and the involvement of all people.
3. In Ecuador, the “Microfinanza Campesina” project was established. The rural banks created in Ecuador are informal and are coordinated by Codesarrollo, a second-tier cooperative credit bank founded in 1997 that monitors, assists, and finances small rural banks. Thanks to a partnership, the Italian BCC system has assisted this bank through the exchange of knowledge and established practices, as well as money (Barbieri 2006).
4. We can distinguish internal mutuality, in that the bank meets the demand for financial services of its members rather than maximizing profits; external mutuality, linked to the obligation to allocate a share of profit to the development of territorial initiatives; network mutuality, thanks to the network system that the CCBs develop on a regional basis.
5. Soft information refers to information that is difficult to find by quantification and difficult to measure (characteristics on which hard information is based) and, therefore, requires a relationship of trust to be collected.
6. The generativity index in place is a multidimensional measure of the generativity of a territory that combines the vitality of economic and intellectual activity (start-ups and companies) with the wealth of social organizations and voluntary activities (cooperatives). Combining these characteristics with the measures of the generative challenge for different organizations (NEET and family dynamics)» (Becchetti et al. 2022).
7. <https://www.creditocooperativo.it/page/il-credito-cooperativo/un-sistema-di-valori/la-carta-dei-valori>.
8. For example, the size, the number of members, the degree of democracy and the management of the cooperatives.
9. In the following paragraph I will explain what are the Territorial praesidium.

REFERENCES

- Accorinti M. (2007) *Terzo settore e capitale sociale. Strategie per un intervento locale*. Argomenti: rivista di economia, cultura e ricerca sociale, Fascicolo 19: 1-10.
- Arnstein SR. (2007) *A ladder of citizen participation*. Journal of the American Institute of Planners 35(4): 216-224.
- Azzi A. (2005) *Banche per lo sviluppo: l'originalità del Credito Cooperativo*. In *Quaderni della fondazione*. Finanza per la felicità. La lezione del microcredito, Roma: ECRA Edizioni.
- Baccini M. (2021) *Prefazione. La microfinanza quale nuovo strumento di «welfare»*. In Boccella N. (2021) *Il sistema del microcredito. Sistema e pratiche*. In Scienze sociali, Studi e Ricerche: 7-147.
- Barbieri C. (2006) *Italian cooperative Credit Bank Model: a new approach to international cooperation for development*. Saving and Development 30(1): 95-103.
- Battaglia F, Farina V, Fiordelisi F and Ricci O. (2010) *The efficiency of cooperative banks: the impact on environmental economic conditions*. Applied financial economics 20(17): 1363-1376.
- Bauer PC, Keusch F and Kreuter F. (2019) *Trust and cooperative behavior: Evidence from the realm of data-sharing*. PLoS ONE 14(8): 1-18.
- Becchetti L. (2008) *Il Microcredito*, Bologna: il Mulino.

- Bobbio E, Magnani M and Semplici L. (2022) *Il contributo delle BCC-CR alla crescita della «generatività comunitaria»*. In Mazzilis MC. (2022) (eds) *Capitale sociale e generatività comunitaria. La spinta delle Banche di Credito Cooperativo*, Roma: ECRA Edizioni.
- Bourdieu P (1980) *Le capital social: notes provisoires*. Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales 31: 2-3.
- Checkoway B. (2011) *What is youth participation?* Children and Youth Services Review 33: 340-345.
- Dahrendorf R. (2009) *Quadrare il cerchio ieri e oggi*. Benessere economico, coesione sociale e libertà politica, Bari: Laterza.
- Delli Zotti G. (2021) *Metodi e tecniche della ricerca sociale*. Vol I: La rilevazione dei dati, Trieste: EUT.
- Diana P and Troisi R. (2012) *Risorse umano e sviluppo locale*. Il ruolo delle Banche di Credito Cooperativo, Torino: G. Giappichelli Editore.
- Edizioni del Credito Cooperativo (2011) *Scrivere il futuro*. Come creare e far crescere gruppi di giovani soci nelle BCC-CR, Roma: ECRA Editore.
- European Association of Cooperative Banks. (EACB) (2018) *European Co-operative banking. Actual and factual assessment* (https://v3.globalcube.net/clients/each/content/medias/publications/each_studies/TIAS_Coop_Banking_w.pdf).
- European Microfinance Network (2019) *European Microcredit Whitepaper*.
- Fiordelisi F. (2021) *La mia banca è resiliente. Perché la natura mutualistica e il radicamento territoriale delle BCC favoriscono lo sviluppo economico anche nei periodi di crisi*, Roma: ECRA edizioni.
- Fumagalli A, Giovannelli G and Morini C. (2018) *La rivolta della cooperazione. Sperimentazioni sociali e autonomia possibile*, Roma: Mimesis.
- Granovetter M. (1973) *The Strength of Weak Ties*. American Journal of Sociology 78.
- Grignaschi PG, Puccinelli G. (a cura) (2009) *L'Alba dentro l'imbrunire*. Roma: BCC, Fondazione Lazio, Umbria e Sardegna.
- Hansen MH, Morrow JL and Batista JC. (2002) *The Impact of Trust on Cooperative Membership Retention Performance, and Satisfaction: An Exploratory Study*. International Food and Agribusiness Management Review 5: 41-59.
- International Labor Organization (ILO) (2015) *Microfinance for decent work*. Enhancing the impact of microfinance evidence from an action research programme.
- International Labor Organization (ILO) (2019) *Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment in Jordan*. (https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/briefingnote/wcms_730743.pdf)
- Kato MP and Kratzer J. (2013) *Empowering women through microfinance: Evidence from Tanzania*. ACRN Journal of Entrepreneurship Perspectives 2(1): 31-59.
- McKillop D, French D, Quinn B, Sobiech AL and Wilson JOS. (2020) *Cooperative financial institutions: A review of the literature*. International review of Financial Literature 71: 1-9.
- Murro P and Peruzzi V. (2020) *Cooperative Banks and income inequality: evidence from Italian provinces*. CASMEF Working Paper 4.
- Olabisi TA and Petronilla O.I., 2011. *Effect of member's participation on cooperative performance: a study of selected multipurpose cooperative societies (MCS) in Awka South Lga of Anambra State, Nigeria*. In International Journal of Multi-disciplinary Research, Vol. IV, pp. 117-126.

- Putnam RD. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Rizza S. (2018) *La cultura della solidarietà. Banche di Credito Cooperativo*. Esperienza di oggi e risorsa per il futuro, Roma: Aracne.
- Rocha EM. (1997) *A Ladder of Empowerment*. Journal of Planning Education and Research 17(1): 31-44.
- Rossignoli D and Rotondi V. (2022) *Banche di credito cooperativo e capitale sociale: un'analisi empirica*. In Mazzilis MC. (2022) (eds). *Capitale sociale e generatività comunitaria. La spinta delle Banche di Credito Cooperativo*, Roma: ECRA Edizioni.
- Sabatini F, Modena F and Tortia E. (2014) *Do cooperative enterprises create social trust?* Small Bus Econ 42: 621-641
- Sfar Feh and Ben Ouda O. (2016) *Contribution of cooperative banks to the regional economic growth: Empirical evidence from France*. International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues 6: 508-514.
- Simmel G. (1900) *Philosophie des Geldes*, Leipzig.
- Troisi R and Nese A. (2012) *Workers' motivation: the Italian case of cooperative credit banks*. Munich Personal RePEc Archive (MPRA) 38025: 1-30.
- Toniolo G. (2012) (eds) *"Per un miglior bene avvenire" Scritti scelti (1871-1900)*, Roma: ECRA Edizioni.
- Yunus M. and Anelli P (trad. di) (2010) *Si può fare! Come il business sociale può creare un capitalismo umano*, Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Zamagni S. (2018) *Banche di comunità. Cambiare senza tradire. Scritti di credito e finanza*, Roma: ECRA Editore.

DECLARATIONS

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest. Informed consent: YES, from the participants interviewed.

FUNDING

The authors received funding for PDH, University of Roma Tre.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alba Francesca Canta is a PhD student and research fellow at the Polytechnic University of Turin in the Sociology of Cultural Processes. Her research interests include human development from a capability's perspective, women's empowerment, and young people, with a focus on educational and cultural processes. She has published: "Empowering women and children. Gender and generations in an empirical analysis of human development in Italy" (FrancoAngeli 2020), "Viola Klein. The feminine as a social construct" (ed.) (V&P 2024) and "Agency is the future. A study on participation among young members of cooperative credit banks in Italy" (Aracne 2025).



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial Share Alike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC SA-4.0). To view a copy of this license, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

This is an open access article, permissioned by the authors and by IJCCR as part of RAMICS (independent association)