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Common Lands, Communities and Governance in Italian Rural Commons: Comparing Collective Domains and ReCommoning Experiences

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Abstract

This article offers an exploratory comparative analysis of rural commons in Italy by examining seven cases through three analytical dimensions: material, human, and regulatory. Rather than treating collective domains and ReCommoning experiences as either identical realities or fully opposed models, the study approaches them as distinct but partially comparable configurations of rural commons. The empirical material consists of ten semi-structured interviews conducted in three Italian territorial areas, Northeast, Center, and South, and analyzed through a qualitative-interpretative approach.

The comparison shows clear differences in historical trajectory, social composition, and governance arrangements. Collective Domains are more often embedded in long-term institutional continuity and formalized criteria of access, whereas ReCommoning experiences emerge more explicitly through collective activation, public land recovery, and assembly-based forms of self-governance. At the same time, the cases also reveal partial convergences: in both configurations, land is treated as more than a tradable asset, responsibility toward shared resources and future generations recurs as a central value, and access is mediated through rules and collective arrangements rather than left to individual appropriation alone.

The article argues that the main contribution of the study lies less in proposing a unified theory of rural commons than in showing the analytical usefulness of comparing different commons configurations through the material, human, and regulatory dimensions. The findings suggest that, under certain conditions, non-market and collectively governed arrangements may sustain meaningful forms of access, care, and socio-ecological reproduction.

Keywords: rural commons, collective domains, public lands, community, regulation

Terres communes, communautés et gouvernance des biens communs ruraux italiens : Comparaison de domaines collectifs et expériences de réappropriation

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Résumé

Cet article propose une analyse comparative exploratoire des biens communs ruraux en Italie, à travers l'étude de sept cas selon trois dimensions analytiques : matérielle, humaine et réglementaire. Plutôt que de considérer les domaines collectifs et les expériences de réappropriation comme des réalités identiques ou des modèles totalement opposés, l'étude les aborde comme des configurations distinctes mais partiellement comparables de biens communs ruraux. Le corpus empirique se compose de dix entretiens semi-structurés menés dans trois régions territoriales italiennes (Nord-Est, Centre et Sud) et analysés selon une approche qualitative-interprétative.

La comparaison révèle des différences marquées en termes de trajectoire historique, de composition sociale et de modes de gouvernance. Les domaines collectifs s'inscrivent le plus souvent dans une continuité institutionnelle à long terme et s'appuient sur des critères d'accès formalisés, tandis que les expériences de réappropriation émergent plus explicitement par l'activation collective, la reconquête des terres publiques et des formes d'autogestion fondées sur les assemblées. Parallèlement, ces cas révèlent également des convergences partielles : dans les deux configurations, la terre est considérée comme bien plus qu'un simple actif échangeable, la responsabilité envers les ressources partagées et les générations futures réapparaît comme une valeur centrale, et l'accès est encadré par des règles et des accords collectifs plutôt que laissé à la seule appropriation individuelle.

L'article soutient que la principale contribution de cette étude réside moins dans la proposition d'une théorie unifiée des biens communs ruraux que dans la démonstration de l'utilité analytique de la comparaison de différentes configurations de biens communs à travers leurs dimensions matérielle, humaine et réglementaire. Les résultats suggèrent que, sous certaines conditions, des dispositifs non marchands et de gouvernance collective peuvent permettre de maintenir des formes significatives d'accès, de prise en charge et de reproduction socio-écologique.

Mots-clés : biens communs ruraux, domaines collectifs, terres publiques, communauté, réglementation

1.0 Introduction

A field of knowledge that has seen growing interest over the last twenty years is that of commons studies. Its global success can be attributed to the work of Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom, who in her Prize Lecture argued that it is possible to organize the governance of socio-economic systems without necessarily resorting to exogenous intermediation through public or private regulation (Ostrom, 2009). The privatization of resources or, due to mere market failures, their entrusting to public authorities are not the only two possible solutions for achieving efficient and sustainable management, resolving complex social dilemmas, organizing collective activities, and establishing robust rules (Ostrom, 1990).

Starting in Italy, the debate has also been animated by legal perspectives that have sought to highlight aspects of the Italian Constitution, specifically Article 43, which provides that, for purposes of general utility, certain enterprises or categories of enterprises may be reserved or transferred to communities of workers or users. These perspectives have challenged liberal theory—according to which property is characterized by the possibility of excluding others from the enjoyment and use of certain goods—recognizing the plausibility that “different subjects may have ownership of the same good” (Rodotà, 2012, p. 109).

In Italy, there is also a tradition of studying collective forms of ownership (collective land arrangements) that have emerged as the historical opposite of individual ownership (Grossi, 1977). The focus of this tradition is the emergence of alternative forms of ownership: individual ownership “is a mere episode in the historical life of property” (Grossi, 1977, p. 99).

These three strands (namely: the political economy of the commons, the civil law construction of the opposite of property, and collective property)—despite significant and sometimes irreconcilable differences—seem to share a basic idea: if there is one characteristic that links the commons of nature, it is fragility; they require attention to preserve the conditions for their reproducibility.

These issues have been included in sociological debate because problems concerning the use of common resources are social problems (Corradi, 2008). These resources have an impact on society, and their governance requires social efforts. Rural sociology has studied the new demand for land, linked to innovative agricultural management processes and forms of collective management, in the context of renewed scientific interest in the conditions of reproduction and the paths of transformation in agriculture (Corrado, 2013).

This article aims to contribute to the debate on how commons are theorized, regulated, and practiced (Pellizzoni, 2018). Furthermore, through case studies, it discusses how commons enter into social relations (Pellizzoni & Osti, 2003).

More specifically, the article develops a comparative reading of rural commons in Italy by examining two different but partially comparable configurations: Collective Domains and ReCommoning experiences. Rather than focusing only on their institutional differences, which are historically significant and analytically relevant, the article asks whether these configurations also reveal some common socio-material orientations concerning access to land, community reproduction, and collective governance for sustainability.

From an empirical point of view, the objective is to analyze rural commons through an approach that observes their interdependent elements without neglecting the distinction between the individual parts. This approach has made it possible to divide the object of the research into three elements: material, human, and regulatory, in order to study their contents individually and, at the

same time, highlight their interrelationships. To this aim, Ostrom's model (1990) is used as a heuristic tool: the characteristics of excludability and rivalry in use are not fixed but vary from higher to lower levels.

Against this background, the article addresses three related research questions. First, how do Collective Domains and ReCommoning experiences differ, and to what extent do they converge, across the material, human, and regulatory dimensions of rural commons? Second, how are access to land, community reproduction, and collective responsibility articulated within these different institutional and historical settings? Third, what does this comparison suggest about the capacity of non-market and collectively governed arrangements to sustain socio-ecological reproduction in rural contexts?

On this basis, the article argues that a comparative reading of rural commons helps reveal not only differences in origin, access, and institutional design, but also a set of shared orientations toward the non-market use of land, collective responsibility, and the reproduction of socio-ecological conditions of life.

2.0 The Theory of the Commons: Perspectives Compared

The issue of land ownership and access has always been of interest to sociology since its inception, because “the structure of property relations is [...] immediately constitutive of the way we think about forms of social coexistence” (Vitale, 2007, p. 11). In different ways, classical social thought addressed the relationship between land, community, and social order: Tönnies (2001) discussed the communal foundations of social life; Weber (2023) investigated the agrarian organization in village communities; Marx (1993) analyzed forms of land ownership in relation to historically specific modes of collective life. Read together, these perspectives suggest that land is not merely an economic asset, but also a social relation, one that helps organize belonging, cooperation, hierarchy, and access to the means of life.

In the Italian context, this issue has also been addressed through legal and historical reflections on collective property. Grossi (1977) showed the relativity of the modern individualistic notion of property and reconstructed the emergence of alternative forms of possession in the historical life of law.

More recent debates on the commons have likewise questioned the adequacy of the public/private binary, especially in contexts marked by the commodification of the biophysical world (Fraser, 2014; Pellizzoni, 2016). From this perspective, whether public or private, property cannot fully capture the plurality of relations that social actors establish with resources, territories, and shared means of reproduction.

Within this broader debate, Ostrom's contribution remains fundamental because it showed that the governance of shared resources cannot be reduced to the opposition between privatization and state control (Ostrom, 1990, 2009). Her work made it possible to observe resources not only in terms of formal ownership, but also in terms of how access, use, and regulation are socially organized. For the purposes of this article, Ostrom's framework is used heuristically rather than normatively: it helps to grasp that excludability and rivalry are not fixed properties but variable, socially mediated characteristics. This makes it possible to analyze rural commons not simply as goods but as socio-material arrangements whose functioning depends on the relation between resources, actors, and rules. This shift is particularly important in relation to rural land. Land is a resource marked by high material relevance, limited substitutability, and strong implications for social reproduction. At the same time, access to land is not organized in the same way everywhere. In some cases,

it is structured through long-standing collective institutions; in others, it is reactivated through collective claims over abandoned or publicly owned resources. This is why, in this article, the focus is not placed on a generic theory of goods, but on rural commons as configurations in which material conditions, social actors, and regulatory arrangements are mutually interdependent.

From an interdisciplinary and comparative perspective, this allows us to bring two different but partially comparable configurations into the same analytical field. On the one hand, there are Collective Domains, that is, historical forms of collective landholding and use rooted in legally recognized communities and long-term rules of access and management. On the other hand, there are ReCommoning experiences, in which public lands not mobilized through the market become the object of collective claims and are re-signified as commons through practices aimed at safeguarding or promoting shared control over the means of life (Giacomini et al., 2018; Mee Kam, 2017; Rossi et al., 2021). The two configurations should not be conflated. They differ in origin, historical depth, legal form, and criteria of membership. Yet they can be compared insofar as both challenge an individualistic understanding of property and both organize, in different ways, collective relations around land and shared resources.

The analytical choice adopted in this article is therefore not to treat Collective Domains and ReCommoning as identical realities, nor to oppose them as entirely separate worlds. Rather, they are approached as two distinct configurations of rural commons that can be compared through three dimensions: (1) the material dimension, concerning the characteristics and uses of the resource base; (2) the human dimension, concerning the actors, values, and forms of involvement that animate these systems; and (3) the regulatory dimension, concerning the rules, principles, and organizational forms through which access and governance are structured. In this sense, the concept of commons used here refers not only to a shared resource but also to a socio-material system in which land, community, and regulation are co-constituted.

3.0 Materials and Methods

3.1 Field of Observation

In social research, within the field of observation, a distinction is made between the territorial sphere and the social sphere (De Rose, 2004, 2017). In this study, the territorial sphere has been defined in relation to three of the five geographical partitions that divide the Italian territory in statistical literature: Northeast (NE), Center (C), and South (S) (ISTAT, 2023). This choice was not intended to produce a statistically representative geographical distribution, but to include contexts that display relevant variation in the organization of rural commons, especially with regard to access regimes, historical trajectories, and governance arrangements.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the levels of excludability—or, more simply, of closure to access—tend to vary across these territorial contexts. In “closed” collective properties, typical of some areas of north-eastern Italy, rights and access are, in some cases, granted to descendants of ancient families, sometimes in the direct male line. In other cases, there are registers reserved for descendants of original families, in which those entitled are registered on the basis of requirements such as continuous abode for a certain period of time and residence that must also be evidenced by actual stable and lasting presence in the territory, as well as by the municipal register.

Figure 1. Territorial variation in excludability and selected institutional denominations of rural commons in Italy.



Source: Authors.

Open civic lands, on the other hand, are typical of southern Italy: access to collective domains is granted to inhabitants as citizens of the municipalities or hamlets, also regardless of the length of residence.

An intermediate case, between that of the Northeast and that of the South, can be found in Central Italy, where forms of agrarian communality and universitas are typical, in which access is subject to residence in the territory of the collective domain for a certain period of time.

Within this territorial field, the social sphere was constructed through the selection of seven cases. The selection followed a comparative qualitative logic aimed at observing, within a limited number of cases, both variation and comparability. Five cases belong to the Collective Domain (CD) typology and two to the ReCommoning (RC) typology. The purpose of this selection was to include cases that differ in historical origin, legal-institutional profile, and degree of closure to access, while remaining comparable in one crucial respect: in all cases, the main resources are not subject to individual ownership and are not mobilized through markets, but function as internal resources produced and reproduced within the same production unit (van der Ploeg, 2013). In other words, there is no buying or selling of land.

The inclusion of both Collective Domains and ReCommoning experiences in the same field of observation derives from the analytical choice, discussed above, to treat them as distinct but partially comparable configurations of rural commons. The former are rooted in long-standing collective institutions and historically sedimented rules of access and management; the latter emerge through collective claims over public lands that are not mobilized through the

market and are re-signified as commons through social practices oriented toward shared control over the means of life. The comparison between these two configurations makes it possible to observe not only differences in origin and institutional design, but also possible convergences in the ways land, community, and governance are articulated.

The seven selected cases, therefore, do not represent a homogeneous empirical universe. Rather, they define a field of variation structured along two main axes: territorial differentiation and typological differentiation. This strategy makes it possible to compare rural commons across different historical and regulatory contexts while preserving the focus on the common analytical core of the research: the material, human, and regulatory dimensions through which these systems are organized.

The cases will be given their full names once, and then an acronym will be used, with the acronym for the name in capital letters and the acronym for the typology of affiliation in lowercase letters.

3.2 Map of Thematic Areas

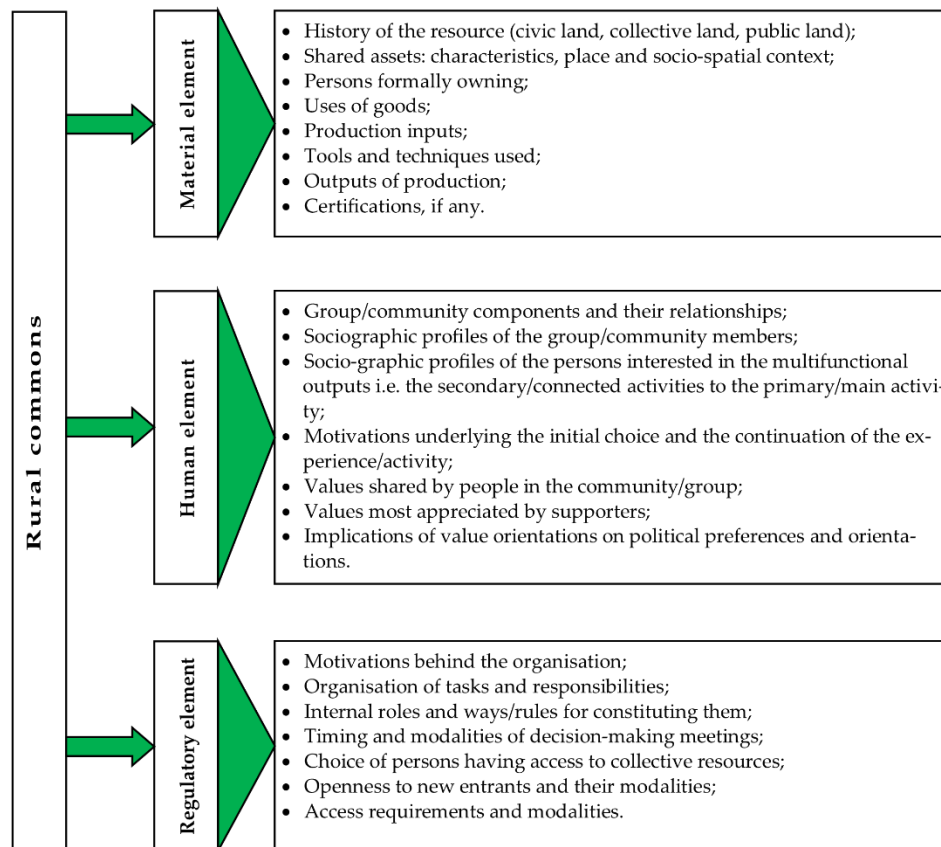
To construct the conceptual map, the components that characterize the social phenomenon and its analytical dimensions were identified. Each of them was taken as a thematic area through which the empirical material could be explored. In turn, the individual thematic areas constituted the elements of a broader analytical map aimed not only at describing the selected cases, but also at making them comparable across different territorial and institutional contexts (De Rose, 2004, 2017).

Operationally, the three analytical dimensions of rural commons (see Figure 2) used to interpret the empirical data were derived from the definition of commons proposed by Hess and Ostrom (2007 p. 349) as “a general term that refers to a resource shared by a group of people and often vulnerable to social dilemmas.” In this article, however, this definition is not used merely in a descriptive sense. Rather, it serves as the basis for an analytical framework through which the selected cases can be compared as socio-material systems composed of interdependent elements.

Thus defined, commons do not coincide with resources alone but with a set of social relations and modes of interaction that condition the outcomes of management, determining the success or failure of collective action (Ostrom & Hess, 2007). They are socio-material systems that include: a material element, that is, the resource base and its associated appurtenances; a human element, i.e., the actors involved in the use, care and governance of the resource; and a regulatory element, that is, the principles, rules and organizational arrangements through which access and administration are structured.

For this reason, the conceptual map also informed the empirical design of the research. The interview outline was organized around these three thematic areas, and the subsequent analysis of the materials was conducted by tracing convergences and divergences within and across cases in relation to each of them. In this sense, the map of thematic areas functioned not only as a conceptual synthesis, but also as the operational bridge between the theoretical discussion, the collection of empirical materials, and the comparative interpretation of the cases.

Figure 2. Conceptual map or map of thematic areas.



Source: Authors.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Following a qualitative-interpretative approach, the research was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of the social actors' point of view directly involved in rural commons, without aiming for statistical generalization. More specifically, the study adopts an exploratory comparative design. Its purpose is to identify patterns of convergence and divergence across a limited number of cases selected for their variation in territorial location, institutional profile, and access regime. The empirical materials were collected through semi-structured interviews with actors directly involved in the selected cases. The interview outline was organized around the three thematic areas derived from the conceptual map, namely the material, human, and regulatory dimensions of rural commons. This made it possible to maintain a common analytical framework across all interviews, while leaving room for case-specific narratives, meanings, and experiences to emerge.

In operational terms, interviewees were approached by email and informed about the aim of the research. This preliminary explanation (Corbetta, 2015) was reiterated before the interview began. At this stage, interviewees were also asked for permission to record the conversation, and their consent was obtained before proceeding. A total of ten interviews were conducted in Italian between May 2020 and March 2021 across the seven selected cases. The distribution of interviews across cases, together with the main characteristics of interviewees, is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. *Distribution and Profile of Interviews Across the Selected Cases*

Interview code	Case	Typology	Territorial area	Interview period
1	Consortium of Men of Massenzatica	Collective Domain	Northeast	May 2020
2	Agrarian Comunanze of the Umbria-Marches Apennines	Collective Domain	Central Italy	May 2020
3	Agricultural Cooperative ‘Co.r.ag.gio’	ReCommoning	Central Italy	May 2020
4	Mondeggi Common Good - Farm Without Masters	ReCommoning	Central Italy	May 2020
5	Agrarian Comunanza Forca of Montegallo	Collective Domain	Central Italy	June 2020
6	Agrarian University of Capena	Collective Domain	Central Italy	December 2020
7 – 8 – 9 – 10	Agrarian Partecipanza of Villa Fontana	Collective Domain	Northeast	March 2021

The interviewees were not treated as generic participants, but as situated actors occupying different positions within the commons systems under study. Depending on the case, they included administrators, users, activists, farmers, and other actors directly engaged in the use, management, or political activation of shared rural resources. The purpose of this selection was not to ensure numerical balance across cases, but to capture a range of informed perspectives capable of illuminating how the selected commons operate in practice.

The interviews were transcribed following the criteria of completeness suggested by Montesperelli (1998). During transcription, personal data were anonymized.

The resulting corpus was then analyzed through a thematic procedure aimed at identifying recurrent themes and sub-themes across the interviews (Demaziere & Dubar, 2000). At the same time, the materials were read transversally through a comparative and interpretative lens in order to examine how similar issues were articulated differently across cases and typologies.

Analytically, the comparison was conducted at two levels. First, the interviews were read within each case in order to reconstruct the internal configuration of the commons system in relation to the material, human, and regulatory dimensions. Second, the cases were compared across and within the two typologies, Collective Domains and ReCommoning, in order to identify both shared orientations and

meaningful differences. This comparative strategy makes it possible to account not only for inter-typology variation but also for intra-typology differences, avoiding an overly rigid opposition between the two configurations.

The methodological contribution of the study therefore lies not in representativeness, but in analytical clarification. By combining a common interview framework with a case-oriented comparative reading, the research seeks to show how different rural commons systems organize access to land, forms of community involvement, and collective governance under historically and institutionally diverse conditions.

4.0 Results and Discussion

The empirical materials are presented according to the three analytical dimensions introduced above: material, human, and regulatory. This organization makes it possible to compare the selected cases across different territorial and institutional contexts without reducing them either to their legal form or to their resource base alone. In each dimension, the analysis highlights both differences and partial convergences between Collective Domains and ReCommoning experiences, with particular attention to how land, community involvement, and collective governance are practically articulated.

4.1 History, Nature, and Land - the Material Dimension

The first analytical dimension concerns the material configuration of rural commons, with particular attention to land, associated resources, and their historical trajectories. Across the selected cases, this dimension reveals an important contrast between long-established collective institutions and more recent processes of collective reactivation. At the same time, however, it also shows a shared tendency to treat land not as a purely exchangeable asset, but as a common resource around which forms of production, care, and social reproduction are organized.

All resources attributable to rural commons systems have followed a more or less long path: some have a centuries-old, if not millennial, history, while others have a shorter history.

The actors in collective domains feel part of a historical path that they wish to continue into the future. The focus on younger generations and the conservation of resources is not only a matter for the present, but also has to do with the past and the future.

The *Consortium of Men of Massenzatica* (CMMcd) has a long history. One interviewee recounts that the community of Massenzatica—a hamlet in the municipality of Mesola in the province of Ferrara—already existed before the year 1000.

The Agrarian University of Capena (AUCcd) is another example of the longevity of common land systems. The name of the collective domain itself conveys a sense of history spanning several centuries:

It's very simple, it comes from the Latin *universitas*, meaning the universality of goods brought together. [...]. [...] or they were possessions of the Church State [...], or they were former noble properties, former feuds, [...] large properties that were then granted to citizens [...] (personal communication, C, int. 6, December 16, 2020).

In the case of civic uses in southern Italy, we can also speak of long duration, of a history that spans centuries. The Universitas Casalium was one of the ancient municipal institutions and included the city of Cosenza and its hamlets between the 12th and 15th centuries, when it began its decline until the definitive disappearance of the commons in Sila at the time of the unification of Italy (De Majo, 2019).

In the CD typology, land is the basis of the system; it is from land that the system takes its cue and starts. The system is created because there is a resource shared by a group of people determined in various ways, “There is no owner, but there is a community that owns the collective land arrangement [...]” (personal communication, N-E, int. 1, May 6, 2020).

Even the resources of the RC typology have their own story that unfolds over the time span that coincides with the commitment to pooling resources and their recovery.

If, in the CD typology, the actors feel like continuators of a centuries-old history, in the RC typology, they “break” with a recent history of abandonment of public resources so as not to abdicate the possibility of relying on public goods to satisfy social needs.

The activists who animated the path that led to the management of the Borghetto San Carlo estate in Rome by the Agricultural Cooperative ‘Co.r.ag.gio’ (ACCrc), started from an analysis of the available public resources and the social needs of a young segment of the population and to connect them they claimed access to public lands. The initial story of the ACCrc is that of a political battle aimed at obtaining the possibility of using a public asset abandoned for over half a century. The story of the Borghetto San Carlo estate is also ecological because the mobilizations have averted the commercial objectives that, possibly, could have been pursued.

Although these trajectories differ significantly, in both typologies land appears as more than a passive resource: it is the material basis around which collective projects, claims, and forms of continuity are organized. The analysis of these fragments of empirical material shows how land enters into production processes—in the two typologies of cases—in two different ways: (1) as a collective and intergenerational heritage that is preserved and handed down, and (2) as the object of political struggles and collective claims. In both modalities, land enters the production process as an internal resource, i.e., as a resource that is not conventionally exchangeable. Land is a basic resource on which other resources depend or through which they enter the system. This brings us to the related topic of secondary resources, which implement systems, deriving their function from their relationship with the primary resource. In both Collective Domains and ReCommoning experiences, this non-conventional status of land makes it possible to treat the resource not only as a productive factor, but also as a basis for collective reproduction.

In the case of Mondeggi Common Good - Farm Without Masters (MCGrc), it is in relation to the basic resources that other resources, including social resources, enter the system. The availability of an estate with its villa, farmhouses, shed, vineyard, and olive grove has meant that, through the initiative of a self-determined group of people, a wider community of users has been built up around these resources, representing a motivational driving force and an element of innovation:

When we opened the first house [...] we began [...] to send out the following message: there are 12,000 olive trees in Mondeggi, would you

like to help us look after them and restore them? [...] This had an almost unexpected response because [...] we created a community of people from scratch who didn't know each other before [...] (personal communication, C, int. 4, May 20, 2020).

The construction of a community around material resources is a distinctive feature of the RC typology. Around these spaces, social bonds are actively built and rebuilt through practices of sharing and care. Differently, in the CD typology, communities appear more historically sedimented, insofar as they gravitate around intergenerational resources and long-standing collective management structures (Dalla Torre et al., 2024; Galán-Guevara, 2023).

Caring for the land is an initial and preparatory step for future developments.

Internal resources are the basis of the development mechanism: a base of available resources (primarily land) is used internally and further expanded and developed, giving the system a certain degree of autonomy that positively influences its reproducibility (van der Ploeg, 2008, 2013). In some cases, this also entails the adaptation of production practices to the ecological characteristics of the resource base:

[...] we favor a polyculture approach. The conformation of the soil, between valleys and hills, suggests this type of vocation. [...]. We favor winter horticulture because there is no water at the geological level [...] So we have developed a dry horticulture project [...] [with] varieties such as the “siccano” tomato [...] (personal communication, C, int. 3, May 15, 2020).

These practices show that the material dimension of rural commons is not limited to the possession of land, but also includes forms of ecological adjustment, care, and innovation shaped by the specific qualities of the resource base.

Agricultural land is not always the main resource in the systems under research. In some cases, in these systems, there is no ownership of agricultural land, or only agricultural land, but of other resources such as forests, pastures and springs. This is the case of the Agrarian Comunanza Forca of Montegallo (ACFMcd) in central Italy.

The ACFMcd is a case in point of the plurality of resources that a collective domain can enjoy. Forca is a hamlet in the municipality of Montegallo in the province of Ascoli Piceno, a scattered municipality in which almost every hamlet has its own collective property:

Our [agricultural communality] [...] owns [...] woods and meadows. [...] We are one of the few communities that still manage the village aqueduct. [...] We manage [...] both the spring and the entire water network and therefore [...] all the water in the hamlet (personal communication, C, int. 5, June 15, 2020).

This self-controlled and self-managed resource base is a prerequisite for the water autonomy of the entire Forca territory. The resource base has also been the foundation of autonomy in the supply of firewood for domestic heating.

The material organization of these systems also emerges in the ways products circulate. In several cases, the relation to the market is selective and mediated, rather than fully subordinated to standardized exchange. While some Collective Domains commercialize only surpluses or rely on local circuits, ReCommoning experiences more explicitly connect production with ethical criteria, short supply chains, and critiques of dominant food regimes. This orientation is clearly expressed by one interviewee, who describes the cooperative's commercial practices as follows:

We have a local market, we work mainly in direct sales and supply [...] other farms [...], [and] small shops [...]. [...] we work a lot on a pre-order basis with collection from the farm and we have also set up a small network of other producers [...] (personal communication, C, int. 3, May 15, 2020).

Taken together, these cases show that the material dimension of rural commons cannot be reduced to ownership status alone. Collective Domains and ReCommoning experiences differ significantly in their historical origins: the former are more often embedded in long-term institutional continuity, whereas the latter arise more explicitly through the collective reactivation of abandoned or publicly owned resources. Yet, despite this difference, both configurations treat land as a non-ordinary resource, one that is closely tied to community reproduction, ecological care, and relative autonomy from market exchange. In this sense, the main contrast lies less in the social meaning attributed to land than in the historical and institutional paths through which that meaning is enacted. These patterns also suggest that the non-market organization of land may support not only collective access, but also broader processes of socio-ecological reproduction.

4.2 Actors, Values, and Forms of Involvement - the Human Dimension

The second analytical dimension concerns the human element of rural commons, that is, the actors who animate them, the values they express, and the forms of participation through which they sustain collective life. Here the comparison highlights marked differences in sociographic composition, institutional embeddedness, and degrees of stability. At the same time, it reveals a more limited but significant set of shared orientations, especially around responsibility, autonomy, continuity, and the collective value of access to land. In some Collective Domains, the human dimension is closely tied to historically sedimented forms of membership. In the CMMcd case, for example, the community that owns the collective property is a community spread across three hamlets of the municipality of Mesola. In Agrarian Partecipanza of Villa Fontana (APVFcd), participants are likewise rooted in a territorially defined community, but the case also shows attempts to renew participation and broaden interest in collective resources beyond strictly agricultural use. As one interviewee explains, this effort involves opening the social significance of the Partecipanza to wider constituencies:

[...] we have tried [...] to broaden the interest of the participants towards those who are not farmers and even towards those who are not [...] participants. Because [...] this reality [...] has a social value [...] (personal communication, N-E, int. 7, March 6, 2021).

The actors emphasize that the APVFcD is not an end in itself, but a structure that must be preserved so that future generations can continue to enjoy the same resources that their predecessors enjoyed thanks to previous generations:

The work of the administration is not purely economic, but here we seek [...] to keep the history and purpose of the Partecipanza intact [...]. [...] yes, there is the economic aspect [...] but the Partecipanza [...] gives me the opportunity to leave a legacy [...] to future generations. [...] (personal communication, N-E, int. 7, March 6, 2021).

An orientation towards the ethics of responsibility can be glimpsed when social actors claim the preponderance of the interests of future generations over the economic implications of the present: the maintenance of a natural resource is understood “as a basic duty of conservation of today's users towards tomorrow's users” (Grossi, 2019, p. 86). From a perspective that sees today as an opportunity to build a better future, the common good is understood not only as a 'thing', but as “a principle for overcoming individual opportunism and selfish concerns” (Vitale, 2004, p. 248).

The human dimension of Collective Domains is not shaped only by continuity. In several cases, it is also affected by demographic pressures, especially aging and weak generational turnover in internal or high-altitude areas. This means that community reproduction cannot be taken for granted. Some administrations actively seek to involve younger actors and to renew the social bases of collective management. In other contexts, especially where land is suitable for agriculture, younger users are still present, although often with profiles different from those of earlier generations:

The typology of users has changed over the years. Whereas before the aim [...] was to support families [...], in recent times there has been more focus on [...] genuine agricultural entrepreneurs. [...] They are all specialized people, most of whom even have university degrees [...] (personal communication, C, int. 6, December 16, 2020)

In ReCommoning experiences, the human dimension is configured differently. Here, communities are less often inherited through long-standing membership structures and more often built through collective activation, shared practices, and political engagement.

In MCGrc, this takes the form of a socially heterogeneous community composed both of a core group and a wider circle of supporters who participate in the activities of the estate. According to one interviewee, in the first case, the age range is 20–25 years; in the second, it ranges from 16–80 years.

In ACCrc, the original group consolidated around collective demands and around a shared orientation toward self-employment, ecological respect, and participatory forms of organization. The activists come from different educational backgrounds and are “on average around 30 years old” (personal communication, C, int. 3, May 15, 2020). The group consists of four young women and three young men. This social physiognomy makes the ACCrc group a significant case in the panorama of Italian agricultural cooperativism, “We are a cooperative made up mainly of young people, [...] [and] women” (personal communication, C, int. 3, May 15, 2020).

The choice of a cooperative as a legal form reflects the participants' shared orientation, "The idea of managing public land with an exclusively private entity for profit could have been a bit jarring" (personal communication, C, int. 3, May 15, 2020). Not that management under a different legal form was inherently negative, but the cooperative, with its mutualistic aims, is "a horizontal, participatory, and democratic entity" (personal communication, C, int. 3, May 15, 2020).

The values that animate the group are not without significant repercussions for the practices through which the political meaning of agriculture as a multifunctional activity is redefined: while the sit-ins and petitions demanding access to public land are overt manifestations, the cultivation practices themselves constitute a creative response to the dominant modes. To paraphrase van der Ploeg (2008; 2010), resistance is expressed not only in explicit forms of protest, but in a multitude of responses that can be expressed in atypical and/or innovative practices. This is a new form of peasant resistance:

Our goal is to use our practices to demonstrate a certain type of political situation [...]. [...] One way to evolve worldviews [...] is to try to demonstrate something in practice [...] (personal communication, C, int. 3, May 15, 2020).

While this political and activist orientation is more explicit in ReCommoning experiences, it also helps illuminate a broader point emerging across both typologies: collective engagement with land is sustained not only by formal entitlement, but also by values, commitments, and practical investments in the continuity of shared resources.

From a comparative point of view, the human dimension shows both contrast and convergence. Collective Domains tend to be associated with more historically sedimented communities, often shaped by long-term membership criteria and intergenerational continuity. ReCommoning experiences, by contrast, are more often characterized by self-selected groups, activist trajectories, and processes of community-building around collective claims and shared practices. Nevertheless, these different social configurations are not unrelated. Across both typologies, the empirical materials point to recurrent values such as responsibility toward shared resources, attention to future generations, and the search for forms of autonomy from purely market-based logics. What varies, therefore, is less the presence of collective orientations than the social composition and practical pathways through which they are sustained.

4.3 Collective Action and Its Rules—the Regulatory Dimension

The third analytical dimension concerns the regulatory organization of rural commons, that is, the principles, rules, and governance arrangements through which access and collective action are structured. This is the dimension in which the contrast between Collective Domains and ReCommoning experiences appears most clearly, since the former are more often organized through historically stabilized institutional rules, whereas the latter rely more explicitly on open assemblies, horizontal procedures, and self-governance practices. Yet even here, the comparison is not exhausted by institutional difference alone, because in both cases, regulation serves to organize collective access, define responsibility, and preserve the conditions of resource reproduction over time.

In the case of the CMMcd, the electorate, composed of all heads of households with voting rights in the three hamlets of the municipality of Mesola, is called to

vote every four years to elect the administrative council, which consists of 15 councilors. Once elected, the council elects—from among its members and by secret ballot—the members of the executive committee and the president (Ragazzi et al., 2020). The council also forms a board of auditors. The electoral system is proportional and allows representation in proportion to electoral strength.

In APVFcd, access and user rights are grounded in historical precedents and are regulated through a combination of descent, territorial belonging, and personal status. Participant status is not sufficient in itself, but must be combined with other formal criteria in order to become an effective right of use. This system is accompanied by a democratic and elective organizational structure:

The Entity has [...] an elected board of directors, [...] an executive body elected from within the board, and a president elected by the board itself. [...] There are 11 councilors who are elected every five years through a proportional electoral system [...] (personal communication, N-E, int. 7, March 6, 2021).

In other Collective Domains, access is summarized through formulas that condense a historically rooted relation between community and territory. The motto “open house with a smoking fireplace,” for example, symbolically expresses the access criteria of APVFcd. A similar territorial logic can be observed in the Agrarian Comunanze of the Umbria-Marches Apennines, where the hearth functions as the basic unit of membership and participation. Here, too, collective governance combines assembly-based discussion with representative procedures and territorial supervision, “Each hearth is a user. Therefore, a family whose representative is the head of the family. [...]” (personal communication, C, int. 2, May 14, 2020). In ACUMcd, the representatives of each household take part in decisions concerning the management and use of resources. Collective governance combines assembly-based discussion, representative procedures, and territorial supervision over woods, water, and other shared resources.

Although many Collective Domains are structured through historically selective criteria, some cases also show a reflexive tendency to reconsider or soften access rules in response to contemporary social needs:

The project we want to pursue is to [...] create urban gardens and give them to [...] people who [...] have [...] the desire to have a small piece of land [...] (personal communication, C, int. 6, December 16, 2020).

Alongside these possible openings, other cases confirm the persistence of more formalized arrangements in which assemblies, elected boards, and periodic budget approval remain central to collective administration. The AUCcd users' assembly is convened twice a year to approve the budgets—both the budget and the final balance—and every five years to renew the elected offices. The users elect the board of directors, which in turn elects a president and vice president from among its members. The board is responsible for managing the collective property, while the assembly acts collectively on matters that go beyond the ordinary.

The regulatory dimension of civic lands in Southern Italy differs from that of the other two territorial areas, since collective assets are managed by municipalities, except where separate administrative committees for hamlets are established. This already indicates that even within the broader field of Collective Domains,

governance arrangements are internally differentiated. Against this background, the organizational profile of ReCommoning experiences appears different again.

In MCGrc, every decision is taken by assembly: there is a primary level of assembly and other secondary levels, and each individual group within the larger group meets in its own assemblies, which converge in the general committee assembly. Each assembly level is open to anyone. Decisions are made horizontally according to the consensus method, which means that decisions are made in such a way that everyone feels represented or can agree with the choice. There are no elected bodies, but rather spokespersons who are chosen on a case-by-case basis. MCGrc has put forward a Declaration of Civic Management of a Common Good in which the group has constituted itself as the Mondeggi Community and declared the estate an 'emerging common good' with specific self-governance arrangements, defining the methods of participation, the subjects involved (e. g., custodians, guests, travelers, and users), the principles of responsibility, guarantees of access and collective use, the principles of cooperation and co-management, and also the economic and financial provisions. The preamble to the Declaration includes the definition of common goods proposed by the Rodotà Commission (2007).

The regulatory dimension is the one in which typological differences are most visible, but it is also the one that most clearly shows a shared concern with the collective organization of access and responsibility. Collective Domains rely on more formalized and historically sedimented arrangements, often combining elective representation, territorial criteria, and inherited or residence-based rights. ReCommoning experiences instead privilege more open, assembly-based, and processual forms of regulation, in which legitimacy is more directly tied to participation and collective activation. Despite these differences, both configurations demonstrate that access to land and shared resources is not left to spontaneous appropriation but is mediated by rules, procedures, and normative principles aimed at preserving collective use over time. The comparison, therefore, suggests not a simple opposition between “closed” and open systems, but a plurality of regulatory paths through which commons governance is pursued.

5.0 Conclusions

This article has proposed an exploratory comparative reading of rural commons in Italy by examining seven cases through three analytical dimensions: material, human, and regulatory. Rather than treating Collective Domains and ReCommoning experiences as either identical realities or fully opposed models, the analysis has approached them as distinct but partially comparable configurations of rural commons. This perspective has made it possible to move beyond a purely legal or ownership-based understanding of the cases and to examine how land, community, and governance are articulated under different historical and institutional conditions.

The comparison also confirms that these two configurations remain historically and institutionally distinct, even when they converge around some shared socio-material orientations. They differ significantly in historical origins, legal forms, criteria of access, and modes of governance. Moreover, variation also exists within each typology, since cases differ in the resources they manage, their social composition, and the rules through which collective life is organized. Although there are no cases of absolute exclusivity, even when “closed,” the systems are based on group access and regulation that ranges from a level at which the community participates in elections, forming an electoral body, to a level at which the assembly decides horizontally on every aspect of resource management, passing through an intermediate level at which the assembly approves the budget

and final balance. As regards access to land, there are cases where there are no restrictions, cases where access is granted by agnatic right and territorial belonging, and intermediate cases where it is granted to citizens of the municipality or hamlet.

Both typologies (CD and RC) show that individual private ownership is not the only institutional arrangement through which access to land and resource use can be organized. Under certain historical and institutional conditions, non-market and collectively governed arrangements may also sustain forms of access, responsibility, and resource care that are not reducible either to private ownership or to state administration alone.

Across different territorial settings, from peri-urban areas to plains, hills, and mountain contexts, the cases suggest a specific profile of rural commons as socio-material arrangements in which land is linked not only to production, but also to forms of care, belonging, and relative autonomy from dominant market logics, and, in some cases, countering processes of rurbanization (Corrado, 2018), i.e., the spread of an urban lifestyle and quality of life in areas that were previously rural.

The cases show how communities and specific modes of governance are built around shared resources in dynamic rather than static ways. These arrangements are shaped by wider social factors such as depopulation, demographic change, and the lack of work that stimulates mobilization.

The social actors involved in the selected cases differ in age, educational background, status, and occupational position. Within these groups, a set of values can be observed: autonomy is the most recurrent value and is understood as the maintenance or expansion of spaces for self-regulation and self-government, but also as a possibility to escape the sole control of the market. At the center of human activity is a community that is shaped around the common land and towards which the actors express an ethic of responsibility.

Responsibility toward shared resources is expressed both in relation to present users and to future generations. In this sense, the cases suggest that rural commons connect sustainability with distributive and intergenerational concerns, insofar as actors seek to preserve ecological balances and common wealth over time. At the same time, territory emerges not merely as a place, but as a value associated with belonging, care, and connection. This helps explain why the commonality of goods is experienced not only as a juridical or economic condition, but also as a practical and moral commitment extending across time. The main contribution of the study lies less in proposing a general theory of rural commons than in showing the analytical usefulness of comparing different commons configurations through the material, human, and regulatory dimensions. This systemic perspective makes it possible to illuminate how access to land, community involvement, and collective governance are practically articulated under different historical and institutional conditions. The present research suggests that individual private property is not always adequate to respond to certain social needs, such as access to land. However, this conclusion must be treated cautiously. The study does not explore in sufficient depth the difficulties and barriers that may arise in accessing shared resources, which risks producing an overly harmonious image of rural commons. Nor does it examine systematically the power relations that may structure influence unevenly within these systems. In addition, while the research considers participation and inclusiveness in decision-making, it does not fully address the qualitative dimension of procedural justice, that is, the perceived quality of governance and the degree of satisfaction among community members. Future research could therefore deepen these issues, expand the comparative base,

and further investigate how different commons arrangements respond to demographic change, social inequality, and ecological pressures.

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