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Relational capital in fishing communities: the case of the “Stretto” Coast FLAG area in Southern Italy

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Abstract

Given the importance of the role assigned to social relations and the exchange of information in the theory that subsumes the latest EU Development Policy planning for 2007-2013, this study analyses the “Stretto” Coast FLAG fishing community, in Southern Italy, from the perspective of the “relational capital” it possesses. The analysis aims at highlighting the quality and intensity of the relationships that exist among fisherfolk and that are of relevance for their professional activities. The study is conducted by integrating qualitative research with elements of quantitative Social Network Analysis. The hypothesis is that the relatively limited effectiveness of current local development initiatives might be partly due to too much isolation and limited information flow among the actors involved. If true, reducing isolation and increasing information flows might contribute to increase the effectiveness existing and future policies. In turn, this would increase the efficiency of use of the limited financial resources devoted to fishery development and, more generally, to the social and economic local development by empowering local actors in finding solutions to existing problems in an area that remains, from many points of view, still problematic.

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1. Introduction

In the context of the EU Common Fishery Policy¹, the five priority Axes European Fishery Fund (EFF)² introduced important measures in support of fishery and aquaculture. An integrated set of such measures requires the concerted action of the several public and private actors to support specific animation activities to strengthen the centrality of coastal areas, while promoting synergies with other existing funds for development. One of the EFF innovations is Axis 4, which has been interpreted as the equivalent of a LEADER initiative for fishery, as it is inspired by the model of Local Action Groups (LAG) developed within EU Rural Development policy³. The introduction of Fishery Local Action Groups (FLAGs) highlights how also in the fishery sector it is imperative to determine which development actions are more appropriate from a bottom-up perspective, i.e., by listening and responding to local requests, of essence for the development of Local Development Plans (LDP).

In accord with the principles set out with the EFF, the “Stretto” Coast Fishery Local Action Group (hereafter FLAG) was established in 2012 and started operating in 2013, covering seven municipalities along the Tyrrhenian coast of the Province of Reggio Calabria in Southern Italy (Marcianò, Romeo, & Cozzupoli, 2015), an area where several socio-economic partnerships are active (Marcianò & Palladino, 2013).

Given the importance of the role assigned to social relations and the exchange of information in the theory that subsumes the EU Development Policy, this study analyses the fishing community of the FLAG from the perspective of the “relational capital” it possesses. By relational capital we mean the net of links, acquaintances, human and professional relations that, when adequately supported, allow a more efficient and effective economic activity.

The analysis aims at highlighting the quality and intensity of the relationships that exist among the operators in the area, focusing on those that are of relevance for their professional activities. A study of any economic activity, even of a single firm, cannot be devoid of considering the relationship that each enterprise maintains the others and with a number of other economic characters playing varying roles of direct and indirect support. For this reason, the study is conducted by integrating qualitative research with elements of quantitative Social Network Analysis (SNA). The use of SNA tools in this research has allowed identification of the main subjects, both private and public, individual or group, of the fishery system in the area, and of their potential role, competencies and actions in keeping the sector viable. In preparation for the network analysis proper, a series of field inquiries has allowed the collection of evaluations and opinions directly from the operators interviewed. These data are used to quantify the intensity of relations and the tightness of the network, by possibly identifying also the presence of “isolated” actors. (Palladino, Cafiero, & Marcianò, 2016).

The hypothesis is that the relatively limited effectiveness of current local development initiatives might be partly due to too much isolation and limited information flow among the actors involved. If true, reducing isolation and increasing information flows might contribute to increase the effectiveness existing and future policies. In turn, this would increase the efficiency of use of the limited financial resources devoted to fishery development and, more generally, to the social and economic local development by empowering local actors in finding solutions to existing problems in an area that remains, from many points of view, still problematic.

2. Description of the study area

The FLAG involves actors from the municipalities of *Bagnara Calabria*, *Gioia Tauro*, *Palmi*, *San Ferdinando*, *Scilla*, *Seminara* and *Cannitello of Villa San Giovanni*. The study area includes, in particular, the ports and fishing communities of Gioia Tauro, Bagnara Calabria, Palmi, Scilla and Cannitello. The official EU Community fishery fleet register⁴ lists 143 fishing vessels recorded in the study area, listed in Table 1 by port and by type of gear.

¹ Regulation (EU) No 1380/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 on the Common Fisheries Policy, amending Council Regulations (EC) No 1954/2003 and (EC) No 1224/2009 and repealing Council Regulations (EC) No 2371/2002 and (EC) No 639/2004 and Council Decision 2004/585/EC

² Council Regulation (EC) No 1198/2006 of 27 July 2006 on the European Fisheries Fund.

³ Council Regulation (EC) No. 1698/2005

⁴ <http://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/fleet/index.cfm>

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