

Article

“Wanna Be Provoked”: Inner Peripheries Generators of Social Innovation in the Italian Apennine

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Abstract: The article examines the territorial conditions, actors, and processes that facilitate or hinder the emergence of social innovation in the inner peripheries. It investigates three social innovation initiatives taking place in the Italian Apennine through a discourse analysis of policy documents and a number of semi-structured interviews of project promoters and local actors. The research findings show that social innovation emerges as an act of territorial provocation practiced by a coalition of actors that weave strong ties with the local community. Provocation takes the form of an adaptive response of the local community to the dynamics of territorial marginalization, a reaction to tackle what we called the “wanna be” feeling, namely, a sense of constriction and frustration found in local inhabitants and linked to conditions of physical and social isolation, inertia, and a lack of future perspectives. This reaction has allowed them to shape new socio-institutional networks and structures that have catalyzed local communities’ capacity to mobilize particular resources or specific assets existing in places, improving their living conditions.

Keywords: inner peripheries; social innovation; rural development; cultural production



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1. Introduction

More than a decade ago, in a seminal article, Bettina Bock [1] underlined the usefulness of the concept of social innovation (SI)—in its analytical, political, and normative dimensions—to make sense of the existing dynamics of and mobilizing new potential for rural development. The reasons are due to the need for social change, which, according to the author, is perceived as very urgent in rural communities, where problems of marginalization, welfare retrenchment, primary sector dominance, and demographic transition are usually common [1,2]. While it is widely known in research and policy making that SI seeks to indicate changes in social relations, people’s behaviors, and norms as a pre-requisite for solving deep social problems and creating a public value in areas where markets and traditional socio-economic policies have failed [3], the idea that SI initiatives and practices can also make a relevant contribution to fighting deep, territorial problems, such as peripherality, marginalization, and shrinkage, is less widespread [4–6]. In other words, SI has been frequently coupled with concepts of empowerment, social capital, and social inclusion, and less with others such as territorial cohesion, place-based development, or spatial justice.

By aiming to fill this gap, this article investigates the contribution of SI initiatives in fighting territorial marginalization through the cross-analysis of three case studies located in Italy. The assumption is that SI, being intrinsically linked to territory [7], can improve the conditions not just of the «people that do not matter», but also, and more importantly, of the «places that do not matter» [8,9].

The analysis is performed in two steps. In the first step, the investigation of the narratives of peripherality in the three case studies is carried on through a discourse

analysis (DA) that has taken into consideration the public policies implemented in the three project areas and interviews of a sample of local key informants. The purpose is to investigate what interpretations of peripherality arise from the case studies and understand what role these narratives play in the emergence of social innovation initiatives. Following the work in [10], we believe that examining the content of these narratives can enable us to develop a better understanding of how social innovation engages with territorial marginalization and how it contributes to empowering lagging rural communities.

In the second step, the article analyses the role of social innovation in the three case studies according to a framework proposed by the authors of [11] that has been readapted in this article. The framework provides a dynamic approach to the investigation of SI as it jointly tackles three dimensions: the Who (actors), the How (process), and the What (interpretations). While the actors' dimension of SI in inner peripheries has been the subject of scrutiny by various authors [12–15], a wide-ranging discussion is still present in the debate on the process dimension of SI in IP, especially regarding how social innovation can be set up in marginalized localities, what organizing models and mechanisms can be adopted, and what role groups and individuals perform in the process [11,16]. The What dimension refers to the need to understand what interpretations local actors and groups attribute to social innovation, how they conceptually frame it, and how these interpretations contribute to sustaining or legitimizing the emergence of innovative practices. The main objective is thus to examine the territorial conditions, actors, and processes that facilitate or hinder the emergence of social innovation [14,17], thereby contributing to improve the understanding of how SI can shape effective actions tailored to contrast territorial marginalization [18–22].

Research findings show that in the three study cases investigated, social innovation emerges as an act of provocation in the locality practiced by a coalition of actors that weave strong ties with the local community. Provocation takes the form of an adaptive response of the local community to the dynamics of territorial marginalization [23], a reaction to tackle what we called the “wanna be” feeling, namely a sense of constriction and frustration found in local inhabitants and linked to conditions of physical and social isolation, inertia, and a lack of future perspectives. As is demonstrated below, provocation has allowed actors to shape new socio-institutional networks and structures that have catalyzed local communities' capacity to mobilize particular resources or specific assets that exist in places, thereby improving their living conditions [24].

The article includes four sections. Section 2 presents a theoretical background that frames the concept of SI in IP. Here, two perspectives are introduced: the first one analyzes the territorial dimension of SI, and the second one studies the conceptual interactions between SI and rural development. Section 3 highlights the research methodology, and specifically, the key criteria for the choice of three initiatives of SI as the study cases in this article, their profile and main connoting features, and the qualitative methods adopted. Section 4 presents the research findings, on the one hand, regarding the narratives of peripherality and, on the other, three analytical dimensions of SI initiatives: the Who (actors), the How (process), and the What (interpretations). Section 5 includes a discussion of the findings, highlighting the innovative aspects that cross-case analysis has brought to light. Section 6 highlights a risk found in the three projects related to the need of SI initiatives for a steady and stable institutional framework and mentions some issues that need to be addressed in future research.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Territorial Dimension of Social Innovation

Despite long-term interest in social innovation among scholars and policy makers, relatively scarce attention has been given to the processes and practices of SI in IP. As already mentioned, several authors underline that there is still minimal knowledge of how SI can be triggered in rural peripheral regions and by whom in terms of research and policy making [21,25]. Starting with this gap, in recent years, a novel strain of research has emerged, aiming to explore the territorial dimension of SI. The main themes investigated

in the debate concern the conceptualization of SI as a territory-structuring principle for producing a socio-spatial change in different localities and for transforming social relations that are context-specific and spatially embedded [17,26]. An emphasis on the creation of new or the alteration of existing relationships is also emphasized by the authors of [27], who underlined that to capture the outcomes of social innovation initiatives, it is important to understand that changes in the relationships among actors of different typologies can reveal new opportunities for actions that were previously hidden. As correctly recognized by the authors of [26], the transformation of social relations in a space and the reproduction of space-bound and spatially exchanged identities and cultures are two features that connote social innovation as a process, where spatial negotiation between agents and institutions with strong territorial connotations is a relevant aspect. In other words, the context is never neutral, and it influences both the content and the process dimension of SI. In analyzing the role of key players in rural SI processes, the authors of [13] adopted a heuristic framework by combining different levels and found out that one of these typically refers to the structural context of regions, namely their territorial, institutional, and socio-economic factors, and how opportunities, resources, and restrictions intervene in the emergence of SI. A more analytical approach is taken by the authors of [17] who, after a systematic review assessing the territorial elements in the SI literature, highlighted that the interrelation between four aspects (actors and agents of innovation, outcomes and purposes, innovation drivers, and contexts and places of innovation) makes the territorial configuration of SI visible. According to the authors, it seems crucial to understand that the territorialization of SI involves the creation of stronger relationships between places and people, which meaningfully influences the capacities of local actors to mobilize different territorial assets to develop the local area. This is why it seems important to recognize that SI is not an aspatial activity, but it is intrinsically linked to the set of territorial resources is rooted in. In other words, the territorial context and the interconnected forms of territorial assets play a relevant role in how SI emerges [28] and explain why social innovation can take diverging development paths and generate different development trajectories in localities, and potentially, beyond them [10]. Accordingly, territorial assets constitute, in their tangible or intangible form, what several researchers have defined as «territorial capital», meaning the set of localized assets—natural, human, artificial, organizational, relational, and cognitive ones—that constitute the competitive potential of a given territory [29,30]. Here, we stress the importance that territorial capital resources, both in their tangible and intangible/immaterial aspects of places and their embeddedness within local socio-spatial configurations and relations, have in the emergence of SI [29]. Socially innovative forces find good ground to proliferate when they are positively linked to inclusive and transparent governance processes that ensure a continuous process of collective mobilization of existing stocks of territorial and local assets [27].

Overall, while SI is distinguished by diversity in its territorial dimension, in the last decade, we have seen a growing number of scholars recognize the relevance of social innovation for rural areas affected by the processes of territorial marginalization and peripherality, hereafter defined as inner peripheries (IP). Inner peripheries (IP) can be defined as territories located at a long distance from the centers of economic activity, which are denied the benefits of agglomeration and suffer from a range of economic handicaps associated with high transport costs, access to sources of innovation, and a 'thin' labor market [31]. Inner peripherality is a multidimensional phenomenon describing the effects of various socio-economic dynamics that cause disconnection from more central territories. The author of [8] provocatively defined IP as «places that do not matter» to indicate a situation of deficit of attention by governments and policies, and where a feeling of lacking opportunities and future prospects is evident». The dominant idea in this narrative is that policy intervention should mainly look at territories where the main drivers of economic growth concentrate in order to maximize the opportunities generated by the economic resources allocated, leaving behind those that are declining. In recent years, this approach has been questioned by authors proposing alternative approaches to

regional policies aiming for a fairer balance between economic efficiency and territorial equity [32–34]. Alongside what may be defined as a reaction by scholars and policy makers, the authors of reference [10] (p. 164) advocated for more research on programs, policies, and actions at the EU and national levels that explores the potential of SI for «reconnecting rural communities to the wider socio-political environment and enhancing their capacity to act in the future through improved power relations and social capital». Increasing is the awareness that SI initiatives can help to tackle territorial problems affecting inner peripheries, such as demographic decline, economic stagnation, remoteness, and geographical marginalization [13]. Another element of interest is the attempt to challenge the hegemonic discourse that has placed considerable attention on the investigation of SI initiatives in urban and metropolitan contexts, following the rhetoric that has interpreted large cities as the main engines of growth and innovation [35–37] and IP as inexorably lagging behind and having an uncertain—or even no—future [8,38,39]. As the authors of [40] (p. 1) also pointed out, there have been discourses examining innovations in big cities, where differentiated resources and powerful actors concentrate. Nevertheless, «less favorable environments [. . .] can make visible the difficulties that every innovation faces in society [. . .] and shed light on circumstances that are often under the radar of policy and innovation research».

2.2. Social Innovation and Rural Development

In the debate on social innovation in inner peripheries, the conceptual connection (sometimes overlapping) between SI and rural development is a dominant interpretation [10,41]. Bock [1,2] and Neumeier [18,25] highlight that social innovation shares characteristics with earlier concepts of rural development—namely the neo-endogenous approach—in the ways in which it emphasizes external collaborations, interaction, and mutual learning between communities and the pooling of knowledge from a variety of actors. The author of [14] explains this interaction and points out that issues of place-based assets, networks, and local scales are important for rural development. Nevertheless, what SI can add to rural development approaches is its capacity to induce broad transformative impacts, and thus, to generate changes in the agendas of institutions, influence basic routines, shape beliefs, and link actors and resources in IP. SI initiatives, as is demonstrated in Section 4.2, somehow «provoke changes in social relations, collective empowerment, political arrangements and/or governance processes, and lead to improvements in the social system» [23] (p. 46).

From the rural development perspective, the process dimension of SI (hereafter, the “How”) is often highlighted with reference to the so-called bottom-linked governance approach, whose relevance lies in its attempt to combine bottom-up and top-down planning and create a multi-level middle ground, where the actors from different levels and sectors (private sector, public administration, civil society, etc.) come together, interact, and exchange resources [28,42]. Network-related and collaborative dimensions of SI mirrors what was interpreted as crucial for the territorial development of IP, demonstrating that marginal rural areas faced with isolation and a lack of expertise and resources emphasize the external input of capital, expertise, and sources of innovation accessed by networks, stretching beyond the local community; this is a fundamental aspect shaping SI. This is the reason why the “Who” of social innovation in inner peripheries is often a multi-actor coalition, where local and external actors and intermediaries in collaboration are able to take initiative and make decisions as part of a collective and creative action that also conveys a process of social learning [1,19,28]. Within this context, the authors of reference [43] highlighted that bottom-linked governance spaces can be seen not just as an outcome of social innovation, but more importantly, as a socially innovative space of action, through which the local and external actors’ efforts toward addressing major sustainability challenges can be channeled. As far as the actor dimension is considered, several scholars have argued about the relevant role performed by social enterprises or cooperatives in promoting and shaping SI in IP. They often take on the key functions that the market or the state do not fulfill anymore [6,14]. As Bock has also underlined [2], it is the need to

reorganize and reinvent local service provisions in inner peripheries that has somehow promoted the development of the social enterprise organizational model, where novel forms of collaboration between citizens, businesses, third-sector organizations, and the government are represented [44,45]. Thus, social enterprises are frequently interpreted as a new form of collective ownership that acts as an intermediary between rural communities and key actors outside the territory. Within the bottom-linked governance model, the role of local governments is also relevant, which—as is demonstrated in Section 4.2—are often the actors that facilitate the process, design the institutional framework, or provide the initial financial resources needed for SI projects to be initiated and flourish [14,46]. Nevertheless, there are also cases in which institutional actors do not possess the resources needed to guide social innovation initiatives or they simply have a weak capacity to sustain the process. In those cases, forms of self-governance have proven to be effective at promoting SI initiatives that have improved social relationships and encouraged civic learning and equality [41]. Here, emphasis is placed on the autonomous capacity of local communities to empower themselves and self-organize their collective action, within a situation in which the development of rural peripheral communities depends on their internal forces and dynamics to a large extent and, specifically, on how these are able to self-organize to solve their problems and, in particular, to get out of the state of “lagging” [47].

3. Methodology

3.1. Case Study Choice and Presentation

The study cases were chosen in a two-step process. Firstly, a preliminary screening of projects and initiatives at the national level was carried out in order to identify a range of cases of SI in inner peripheries. The authors decided to focus their attention on Italy, as it is the domestic context in which they operate and are most familiar with and, specifically, to cases located in the Apennine region. The Apennine region is a long mountain range extending along the length of the Italian peninsula. Despite it being a differentiated and multifaceted context, the Apennine region is commonly interpreted as the country’s territory that is most affected by social, economic, and demographic decline, which has been accentuated by some recent catastrophic events, such as the 2009 and 2016–2017 earthquakes which hit the area of L’Aquila and the inner territories of Central Italy, respectively [48,49].

At this stage, the following three criteria were defined to identify and map the projects:

- The projects should exhibit different declinations of SI in peripheral areas. This criterion is based on the idea that—as demonstrated in Section 2.1—social innovation in inner peripheries does not manifest as a univocal and uniform phenomenon, but rather, it is often the result of a mix of different types of activities and covers multiple sectors and topics [27].
- The projects should be implemented, have produced tangible outcomes, and have conveyed the mobilization of territorial capital assets in the production of social innovation. As mentioned in Section 2.1, here, territorial capital is interpreted as the amount of material and immaterial resources that are embedded in the local context and result from a long-lasting co-evolutionary process between local societies and the territory [50]. Thus, the objective is to demonstrate the relevance of territorial capital and its forms of mobilization in the emergence of SI initiatives [51,52].
- The projects should convey processes of self-recognition and increased social cohesion in local communities. This criterion allows researchers to investigate the extent to which SI leads to changes in basic routines, beliefs, power relations, and/or resources in local communities [23] and, specifically, if SI projects are conducive to social capital improvement and strengthen the empowerment and the collective identity of local communities [2,25,53].

In addition, attention was given to identifying cases with a balanced geographical distribution between northern, central, and southern Italy in order to explore different areas of the Apennine region and investigate multiple localities and many territorial conditions that frame the emergence of SI in the inner peripheries of the Apennine region.

After the first screening and considering the relevance of the above-mentioned criteria, the authors identified three cases: Fondazione Ebbio, BorgoFuturo, and ArtePollino (Figure 1). As shown in Table 1, the three case studies are located in municipalities that, despite being labeled as inner peripheries, show different demographic, geographical, and socio-economic trends. For instance, over the last 40 years, Bettola and Latronico have experienced a harsh decline in population, which is also reflected in negative workforce variation. Instead, despite Ripe San Ginesio's smaller population—one of the municipalities where the Borgofuturo project is organized from—it has had more stable dynamics due to its favorable position at a relatively short distance away from a provincial capital town (Macerata), where a different range of services are provided.

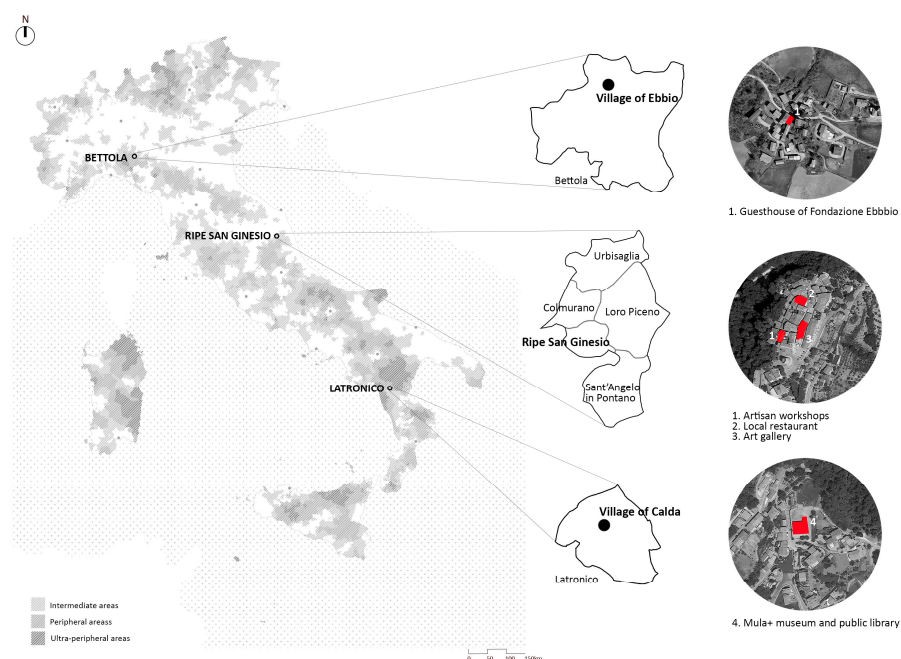


Figure 1. Localization of the three case studies on the map of the peripheral and ultra-peripheral areas as classified by the National Strategies of Inner Areas (SNAI). Source: elaboration by the authors.

Table 1. Geographical and socio-economic data of the municipalities where the three case studies are located. Source: elaboration by the authors using ISTAT data.

	Bettola	Ripe San Ginesio	Latronico
Total population (2021)	2.608	818	4.129
Population variation (1981/2021)	−32%	0.3%	−29%
Population variation (2001/21)	−17%	6%	−21%
Population density (ab/km ²)	21.13	85.74	53.54
Workforce variation (1981/20)	−57%	−12%	−13%
Distance (in km) to a center of supply of services (Poles ¹)	37.5	23	119

¹ According to the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), a municipality is considered to be a “Pole” when it is able to simultaneously offer the following services: an articulated upper secondary school supply; a hospital with a Department of Emergency, urgency and acceptance of at least level I; a railway station served by metropolitan, regional, and long-distance services.

The first case, Fondazione Ebbio, is a third-sector organization run by a couple of Dutch inhabitants who decided to buy a second house around 15 years ago and moved as temporary residents to Ebbio, a semi-abandoned historical village of XVI century origin located within the municipality of Bettola in the Apennine territory of the province of Piacenza. The foundation's explicit objective is to prevent the abandonment of the village. Over the past two years, its activity has mostly covered two axes: agricultural management and village regeneration. In the field of agricultural management, it has played the role of guarantor and intermediary for the purchase of farmland around the village, facilitating

exchange between local farmers. This has facilitated their agricultural work, making agricultural activity more economically sustainable, and preventing phenomena of land abandonment and landslides, which represent common problems in shrinking rural areas in Italy [54]. In terms of village regeneration, the foundation has purchased ruins and abandoned or empty buildings that owners do not inhabit or use anymore (Figure 2). In order to do so, it has conducted the onerous work of tracking down the property owners, who are often distant or unreachable, a long and complex search process. The objective of purchasing is to fight the material decay of built heritage, restore the spaces under a common architectural and planning project, and create workshops for cultural production, local food shops and taverns, and temporary residencies for artists and tourists. While the work on the first axis has mostly been completed, the one on the second axis is still ongoing, and at the moment (March 2023), just one building has been readapted as a tourist guesthouse.



Figure 2. Few abandoned buildings in the village of Ebbio. Source: Fondazione Ebbio.

The second study case is Borgofuturo, a project that has the objective to promote cultural and art production within a context of environmental sustainability [55]. It was created in 2010 as a cultural association based in Ripe San Ginesio, a small municipality in the valley of Fiastra (Marche region), with its main activity being the organization of a summer festival on sustainability. Since its creation, the festival has been largely supported from economic and logistic viewpoints by the local administration of Ripe and has grown year by year in terms of quality and impact of the program, profile of the invited guests, and size of the audience. Alongside the festival, the local administration has worked synergically with the Borgofuturo association to plan and implement a range of different interventions and activities in the field of sustainability, such as the installation of solar plants to produce energy for municipal facilities, investment in trash recycling, the regeneration of a former quarry for creating new green and recreational spaces for the local community, and, more importantly, the restoration of abandoned spaces in the historical village for hosting new artisan workshops and commercial activities. This last action has made a relevant contribution to fighting material decay of the historical village, which is a common problem and a paradox of historical centers in Italy [56]. In the past two years, the festival has expanded its activities to involve also other four surrounding municipalities in the Fiastra valley, and between 2020 and 2021, this process was also accompanied by the setting up of a participatory event (Figure 3) coordinated by the Borgofuturo association involving various local institutional and civil society actors who developed a forward-looking project for the territory in the valley through several thematic roundtables [55,57].



Figure 3. One of the “territorial roundtables” held in Colmurano (MC) in July 2020, organized within Borgofuturo Festival. Source: Vera Munzi.

ArtePollino, the third study case, is a cultural association created in 2009 within the framework of a national program called “Sensi Contemporanei”, which includes among its objectives the creation of local development through contemporary art in a number of localities in Southern Italy included within the protected natural area of the Pollino National Park. The association has established a local base through the aggregation of local experts and activists already operating in the area of the park motivated to carry out project activities. “Sensi Contemporanei” has funded the creation of notable artworks in the area of the park by world-famous artists, Anish Kapoor, Carsten Holler, and Giuseppe Penone, and the realization of participatory art experiences by the artists Anni Rapinoja from Finland and Claudia Losi from Italy, who have significantly involved local inhabitants, seen not just as beneficiaries, but as co-producers of the artworks. In recent years, ArtePollino has been involved in several social and cultural activities in Latronico and in the surrounding municipalities, playing the role of a permanent social and cultural attractor for the local community [58]. Most of these activities have taken place in a municipal space (MULA+) located in Calda, a village in the municipality of Latronico, for which the local government granted to the association through a lease, where two municipal museums, a public library, and a multifunctional space for cultural and social events are present (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The building of MULA+. Source: Arte Pollino.

3.2. Data Collection and Qualitative Analysis

The empirical research that informs this article is mainly qualitative and includes two main methodologies.

The first methodology is the hosting of semi-structured interviews. We conducted a total of 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews. For the first case study (Fondazione Ebbio), interviews were addressed to 2 project promoters, 2 local inhabitants with a direct relationship with the project activities, and 1 local administrator of the municipality (Bettola) where the project is implemented. For the second case study (Borgofuturo), 3 interviews were conducted: 1 with a project promoter, 1 with a local administrator of the municipality hosting the project, and 1 with a inhabitant living in the locality (Ripe San Ginesio). For the third case study (ArtePollino), we interviewed 2 project promoters and 1 academic who has conducted research on the project and directly contributed to its activities. The interviewees were contacted by the research team via e-mail and asked whether they would be available to be interviewed for approximately one hour. As the preliminary stage, the research framework and objectives were briefly presented, and it was made clear that the data and all the records would be kept confidential. All the people contacted agreed to be interviewed. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min, were recorded, and then fully transcribed. The interviews were conducted starting with a common set of questions that was slightly rearranged according to the profile of the interviewee. The set of questions cover two main thematic areas: (i) the narratives of peripherality, with the objective to understand the interviewee's understanding of peripherality, and the contextual declination of the narrative in each locality; (ii) the Who, the How, and the What of SI in IP, namely the actors, the processes, and the interpretation of SI characterizing the three projects, respectively. In particular, following a framework readapted by the authors of [11], these three dimensions were used in the article to understand the contribution of SI initiatives and practices for spotlighting inner peripherality and promoting rural development in the three case studies.

The second methodology is a discourse analysis (DA) that took into consideration two main sources of information: (i) the main documents containing the public policies implemented in the three case studies (Table 2), and (ii) the transcriptions of interviews with previously mentioned local informants. Here, the DA is interpreted as a methodology that produces knowledge through language and investigates the context within which this knowledge is produced and reproduced and acts to delimit what is 'possible' and structure what is 'thinkable' [59].

As far as the public policies investigated in the research are considered (Table 2), the authors decided to focus their attention on two main policies experimented in Italian inner peripheries: the National Strategy for Inner Areas (Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne; hereafter SNAI) and the EU Leader program. In relation to these policies, the main official documents for each policy were analyzed: the Area Strategy (AS) for the SNAI, and the Local Development Plan (LDP) or Local Development Strategy (LDS) for the LEADER program. The SNAI is a governmental place-based policy that targets a number of pilot peripheral areas at the national level. Pilot areas are chosen on the basis of a set of indicators that mostly refer to their physical distance from centers providing a range of essential services (education, health, and mobility) [60]. The main objective of the strategy is to contrast territorial marginalization and demographic shrinkage by improving the quantity and quality of the welfare provision and promoting local development initiatives in combination with the European Structural Investment Funds managed by Italian regional governments [32,61]. One of the innovative elements of the strategy is its multilevel governance process, which involves local authorities and communities and national and regional authorities in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of territorial development strategies. Differently from the SNAI, LEADER is an EU program co-financed through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and implemented by the activity of public-private partnerships, called Local Action Groups (LAGs), with the objective to engage local actors in the design and delivery of strategies, decision making,

and resource allocation for the development of rural areas [62,63]. LEADER is commonly considered to be «one of the most influential sets of activities to address this spirit of mobilizing the countryside, through focusing on endogenous potential and activating local stakeholders across all sectors» [7] (p. 57).

Table 2. Policy and strategic documents investigated through DA. Source: elaboration by the authors.

Case Study	Policy Documents Investigated in DA		
	National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI)	LEADER Program	Other Documents Analyzed
Fondazione Ebbbio	[64]	[65]	/
BorgoFuturo	[66]	[67]	[68]
ArtePollino	[69]	[70]	/

It is interesting to highlight that the three study cases under investigation have different relationship with the two public policies due to the fact that their geographies do not overlap; rather, they have established asymmetric links with the administrative configuration of the territory. Fondazione Ebbbio, for instance, is located in a municipality (Bettola) where both policies are jointly implemented. Instead, BorgoFuturo acts in a territory of five municipalities (Ripe San Ginesio, Colmurano, Urbisaglia, Sant'Angelo in Pontano, and Loro Piceno), one of which (Sant'Angelo) falls within the project area of SNAI, with the others being located just outside its perimeter. All of them fall within the perimeter of LAG Sibilla, through which the Leader program runs. ArtePollino is based in the municipality of Latronico, which is located slightly outside the perimeter of the AS of Mercure, Alto Sinni, and Val Sarmento, but inside the area of the LAG Cittadella del Sapere. In other terms, while the SNAI is implemented in the territory of just one study case (Fondazione Ebbbio), with the other two being located just outside, the LEADER program is present in all three localities.

In addition to official public policies, attention was also focused on identifying and investigating the presence of other local development strategies with a bottom-up origin and those that lie outside the perimeter of public action. The search returned in Ripe San Ginesio only, the presence of the already-mentioned Local Project Borgofuturo+, a territorial strategy elaborated by the association after several territorial roundtables taking place between 2020 and 2021 and to which more than 100 local actors have contributed.

During the discourse analysis, we isolated quotes that illustrate the narratives of peripherality in the policy documents of the three study cases. We achieved this by manually coding data that fell into the following categories, with each datum corresponding to a keyword adopted in the analysis and expressing a connoting feature of inner peripheries: peripherality, marginality, disadvantage, vulnerability, fragility, and shrinkage. The keywords were in Italian, as this is the language in which the policy documents were written. We then added the key term “social innovation” with the objective to understand if the policy documents mention social innovation and how the policies frame this concept. Using this analysis, we identified a total of 79 records, the majority of which (75) refer to one of the six keywords used in the search, and a small group (4) that included quotes related to social innovation. The next step was the categorization of the records in groups through the preliminary recognition of narratives of peripherality. We then compared these categories with the interview transcriptions to verify if the same narratives were present in the voices of the interviewees, and we found a range of correspondences, especially regarding narratives n. 2 and 3. In giving priority to the identification of narratives present in policy documents, we considered policies as the medium of a collective process of the construction of meanings, which often implies a complex negotiation between local institutions, policy makers, civil society representatives, and private actors who are able to reveal prevailing—and sometimes contested—interpretations of peripherality. The contents of the narratives are presented in Section 4.1.

4. Findings

This section presents the outcomes of the empirical research conducted on the three case studies. Section 4.1 highlights the narratives of peripherality that the authors recognized through the DA of policy documents and transcriptions of the interviews made in the research. Section 4.2 includes a cross-analysis of the three cases according to three lenses: the interpretation of social innovation present in the projects (What), the actors involved (Who), and the processes (How) that characterize them.

4.1. Narratives of Peripherality

This section analyzes the empirical data collected during the research through recognition of the main narratives of peripherality underlined by the policies investigated and the actors interviewed. Here, the narrative is interpreted as way of ‘making meaning’ [71], and specifically, as «the symbolic presentation of a sequence of events connected by subject matter and related by time» [72] (p. 205). According to the authors of [73], the usefulness of narratives for studying territorial dynamics lies in their potential to highlight the discursive, social nature of a strategic project, linking it to cultural and historical contexts. While we believe that the narrative as a set of ideas that contribute to shape the already mentioned territorial capital [50] can be a helpful instrument for developing a better understanding of the meanings, views, justifications, and actors in IP, at the same time, we are aware that the translation from data to narrative is inevitably shaped by the epistemic preferences of the authors [74]. In this sense, more empirical work would be needed to be conducted in the future to investigate if and why the same narrative of peripherality is also present in other cases and what contextual social, economic, and territorial conditions shape it.

Overall, the discursive investigation of policy documents and interview transcriptions in the three case studies highlighted three main narratives of peripherality. It is interesting to notice that these narratives are not distinct and separated, but rather they are connected and partly overlapped, making inner peripherality a concept that is semantically complex and vibrant.

The first narrative is somehow predominant in the discussion about territorial inequalities (among them: [33,75,76]) and interprets inner peripheries as territories lagging economically and subjected to economic decline. According to this view, the local economy in IP is described as typically less developed, more isolated, more dependent on public investment and employment, more exposed to changes in market conditions, and not able to benefit from the sources of innovation [31]. For instance, the LDP of LAG Sibilla [67] underlines the weakness of the local economic system and emphasizes some critical aspects, such as the progressive decrease in commercial services in peripheral areas related to the lack of critical mass of customers, the reduction of credit granted to local companies, especially to small enterprises, and the lack of local entrepreneurial skills. The LDS of the LAG of Ducato mentions that the employment rate of the area is «one of the lowest of the whole region» [65] (p. 43). On the same vein, the LDS of LAG Cittadella del Sapere highlights that «the economic structure of the area is characterized by a strong internal imbalance and by elements of structural *fragility*, which represent a real *constraint* for the overall growth of the territory and for triggering significant take-offs» [70] (p. 10) (italics by the authors).

The economic vulnerability also characterizes the agricultural sector, which despite the presence of potentials given by several high-value agri-food productions, policy documents interpret as being characterized by a lack of dynamism and experimentation. This view is also highlighted by one interviewee (AW), who pointed out that «one big problem of this territory is the monoculture or bicultural agriculture [. . .] I have the feeling that there is little experimentation in this field». The local agricultural economy in the three study areas is connoted by several structural weaknesses, such as the under-sizing of farms, the aging of farmers, the fragmentation of land properties, and a lack of effective organizational models. These conditions all result in low revenues for farmers that do not encourage young people to enter this economic sector [65,70].

The second narrative interprets inner peripherality as a condition of constraint and condemnation that local communities are subjected to, both subjectively and collectively. On the basis of this condition, there is the idea that inner peripheries suffer from a range of social, economic, and territorial handicaps [31] that are difficult or almost impossible to overcome. As also pointed out by the author of [8], there is an increasingly wide-spread belief that the poor development prospects make these places «condemned» and that they have no future. For instance, the AS of Mercure, Alto Sinni and Val Sarmento [69] (p. 15) underlines that «the territory has expressed the need to deal with the disservices to which its citizens are *forced* by the marginality [. . .] The permanence in these places is often perceived as a sort of *condemnation*» (italics by the authors). This feeling of condemnation and frustration was also underlined by two interviewees:

«Local inhabitants are all somewhat *condemned* to be there . . . » Interviewee SV

«The people who live in these territories manifest a sense of *frustration*, there is a continuous “Wanna be”. And though they themselves try to create conditions for change, they come up against a series of obstacles». Interviewee SC

Even when individuals or groups materialize a reaction, this clashes with the many obstacles present in the locality that act as barriers to initiating change. One interviewee defined this sense of frustration as a “Wanna be” perpetual condition, which indicates the presence of disparity in the local community between the objective of improving their living conditions and the impossibility of achieving concrete outcomes. Interlocutors describe the difficulty of these territories to get out of the condition of condemnation and constraint and mention the absence of effective policies and investments that are able to sustain development dynamics in IP and contrast socio-spatial inequalities. As a result, these places are defined by interviewees as «marginalized» and «forgotten» territories.

«[These territories] are not marginal places, they are places marginalized by the absence of policies, by the absence of investments, by the absence of perspectives». Interviewee SC

«It is a territory that has been fairly forgotten by national and regional institutions». Interviewee PT

This narrative is recurrent in the literature about inner peripheries [8,9]. Nevertheless, different responses from local communities to the condition of distress and resentment emerged from the three cases, as if a different intensity of the “Wanna be” feeling mentioned by the interviewee was able to cause a different reaction in the locality. The aspects related to the local community’s response and reaction to inner peripherality are examined and developed in the following section.

The third narrative is a result of the previous one and interprets inner peripheries as territories subjected to deep social and emotional fragility. Local communities living in the IP experience conditions such as aging, low levels of education, social exclusion, and digital and physical isolation. As also highlighted by some authors [61,77], this often translates into forms of withdrawal and disconnection from democratic and political processes and social networks. For instance, in the AS of Mercure, Alto Sinni, and Val Sarmento [69], specific attention is paid to the social fragility both of young people due to the scarce sense of belonging to the locality and the uncertain future and of the fragile people who face significant barriers to accessing welfare and health services.

«The fragility of the peripheral area is also an emotional fragility, more difficult to measure with indicators and therefore more complex to deal with. Unfortunately, the correlation between aging and disease, between aging and drug addiction, between aging and loneliness, and between aging and disability, persists». [69] (p. 32)

This aspect is also mentioned by one interviewee, who emphasized the feeling of «physical and sentimental abandonment» that local inhabitants experience, especially young generations living in the locality.

«We frequently encounter emotional fragility. It is a feeling of abandonment that is not just physical but it stands on a sentimental level. Even those who have remained feel that they cannot expect much from these places [. . .] This is why many young people are also encouraged to leave by the adults themselves. They think there is no future here, there is no possibility of building something fertile . . . ». Interviewee RF

Within this narrative, the most urgent issue to tackle is the problem of welfare (in)accessibility, which is emphasized in relation to health and social services. The scarce accessibility of services contributes to the presence of barriers to social protection for the more fragile members of the population and makes the exercise of citizenship more difficult in the inner peripheries [78]. Healthcare systems in IPs face urgent problems in the ways in which they respond to emergency situations. As an example, both AS policy documents of the Appennino Piacentino e Parmense [64] and of Mercure in Alti Sinni and Val Sarmiento [69] underline that the time between the telephone call to the operations center and the arrival of the first aid vehicle on-site takes 31 and 33 min, respectively. These values are significantly higher than the average wait time in Italian inner peripheral areas of 21 min, and this creates a high degree of risk in the event of a sudden state of ill health of inhabitants requiring prompt intervention.

4.2. The What, the Who, and the How of SI in the Three Projects

The three cases are discussed comparatively according to a conceptual framework readapted from [11], which covers three dimensions: the interpretation of social innovation (What), the actors involved (Who), and the processes (How) characterizing the SI initiatives (Table 3). The main objective is to investigate the distinctive features that characterize SI dynamics of the three inner peripheries under analysis and to determine the extent to which, taking into consideration the relevant diversity characterizing the three cases, they have offered fertile ground for SI to emerge and develop.

Table 3. Summary of the three dimensions investigated in the three case studies. Source: elaboration by the authors.

Case Study	The Who of SI	The How of SI	The What of SI
Fondazione Ebbbio	A non-profit foundation run by a couple of temporary residents, knitting strong relationships with the local community.	A local and relatively autonomous governance process finalized to implement project activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Novel mobilization of existing abandoned or underused local assets; • Construction of new imaginaries of peripherality.
BorgoFuturo	A third-sector association interacting with local institutions, civil society and academia.	Bottom-linked governance interactions with a focus on inter-municipal cooperation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Novel mobilization of existing abandoned or underused local assets; • Construction of new imaginaries of peripherality; • Empowerment of the lagging behind local communities.
ArtePollino	A third-sector association, cooperating with a wide array of local institutional and civil society actors.	Bottom-linked governance interactions with the integration of top-down and bottom-up actors and resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction of new imaginaries of peripherality; • Empowerment of the lagging behind local communities.

As far as the What of social innovation is considered, all three cases demonstrate that it is able to influence attitudes, behaviors, and structures [27] and mobilize or create a new value for local assets [79]. The aim of this provocation is to improve the local socio-economic and environmental conditions and, specifically, to regenerate inner peripheries and combat territorial marginalization and shrinking dynamics. The study cases highlight three main interpretations of SI as a form of provocation. The first looks at provoking the inner periphery via the novel mobilization of existing unused or underused local assets. In the case of Borgofuturo, the local government working synergically with the local

association has launched a public tender to assign empty spaces in the historical village to young artisans and retailers to settle down new craft and commercial activities at very advantageous fees.

«For the first three years spaces are given on almost free loan for 10/20 euros a year. Then if the activity goes well, after three years there is a small increase in the fee . . . Let's say that the brewery that has a very large space pays 180 euros. The fee is quite low. Then they pay the bills . . . ». Interviewee PT

An analogous outcome, but using a different approach, is pursued by Fondazione Ebbbio; rather than delegating the action to the local administration, it has purchased empty or shabby buildings and ruins adding value to left-over properties, thus attracting new functions and practices in the semi-abandoned village. The second interpretation looks at provoking the inner periphery via the empowerment of local communities that are lagging behind from the social and economic points of view. This is the case for ArtePollino, where much of the work by the local association has been focused on creating and maintaining a community welfare space (MULA+) in the shrinking village, ensuring the presence of a sort of presidium for the local community that strengthens social networks and provides access to a number of social and cultural services and activities. Moreover, this aspect is also evident in Borgofuturo, where the focus of the Local Project Borgofuturo+ is expressed in four strategies to enhance the inhabitants' quality of life through new entrepreneurship opportunities, cultural events, and innovative forms of collective and shared welfare provision [57]. The third interpretation looks at provoking the inner periphery via the construction of new imaginaries of peripherality. This is the case for Artepollino and Fondazione Ebbbio, where the conditions of marginality and peripherality are seen as windows of opportunity for generating and experimenting with innovation. While in the first case, the nature–art nexus has served as a focus for deconstructing the local community's perception of marginality and reconstructing its sense of belonging [80]; in the second case, peripherality is seen as a condition that can introduce possibilities for generating new economic opportunities and alternative life chances away from the chaos of cities and metropolitan areas. One example concerns the material emptiness and vacancy found in villages. Local communities and institutions generally view these conditions as a problem related to shrinkage and outmigration of inhabitants moving elsewhere to search for better living conditions. It is not common to interpret empty spaces as a resource, a field of experimentation and freedom, and as spaces where practicing exercises of innovation and materializing visions of the future [58].

«I also like to look at this marginality as an opportunity. It means that there is an emptying, depopulation, but in contemporary life the need for space, silence, nature also emerges». Interviewee AW

In the case of Borgofuturo, the association has interpreted the Festival of Sustainability as a ground of experimentation for achieving environmentally and socially sustainable futures. This refers to a common assumption present in the literature that SI in rural development is commonly referred to as a contribution to the transition of local communities towards sustainability [1].

«The main objective of the project is the construction of a new imaginary for a place. [. . .] You have the place, in the past it was Ripe San Ginesio, now perhaps it's the Fiastra valley, through the festival you propose alternatives, a future that could be». Interviewee MG

It is interesting to notice that all three cases look at cultural production as a tool for constructing new imaginaries of marginality. While in ArtePollino and Borgofuturo, this is seen as a central ingredient of the provocation of the local context and as a tool to generate local development, a different approach is taken by Fondazione Ebbbio, where cultural production is part of a vision that integrates different activities. The reasons may lie in the somehow extreme situation of semi-abandoned villages dispersed in the Apennine,

which requires more pragmatic and integrated efforts of combining different activities and economic sources. Accordingly, the reaction to abandonment can only be set up by triggering a good nexus between agriculture, culture, and loisir.

As far as the Who of social innovation is considered, it is interesting to note that in the three cases, the main actor promoting social innovation is a third-sector organization, specifically associations in BorgoFuturo and ArtePollino, and a non-profit foundation in Fondazione Ebbbio. In two cases (BorgoFuturo and ArtePollino), the process of social innovation emerged thanks to the relevant contribution played by the public administration, especially in terms of the allocation of financial resources and logistical support. In the case of Borgofuturo, a key role is played by the local government that has allocated a significant amount of its budget for organizing a festival on sustainability. Interestingly, the festival has laid the foundation—as a sort of catalyst—for a long series of actions and practices that have generated SI in the IP. In the case of ArtePollino, the cultural and social activities of the local association were initiated within a large national program called “Sensi Contemporanei” that allocated a significant amount of funding (EUR 1 million) from the EU, the National Ministries of Economic Development and of Cultural Heritage and Activities and the Regional Government, through a Framework Program Agreement (Accordo Programma Quadro). While public administrations have economically sustained the emergence of the projects, it is also true that without the crucial role played by local actors as promoters and coordinators of the projects investing their expertise, time, and local knowledge in the activities, the projects could not have been created. This shows that, as already demonstrated by several authors [1,4,19,28], the initiators of SI processes in IP are often local actors who have strong local ties, but who also are supported by external actors and intermediaries bringing external knowledge to the locality, and taking initiative as part of a collective action.

The Fondazione Ebbbio case study is different; here the role of local administration emerged only later in the project and financial resources to achieve project goals were allocated by a third-sector actor—a Foundation—run by two inhabitants from abroad who moved into the locality fifteen years ago.

Overall, a good level of interaction with the local administration is a common element of all three cases, despite the issue of scarce innovation in public procedures and decision-making processes sometimes emerges.

«In Latronico, we now have local administrators who certainly listen to us. However, we always lack that step in doing something extra, in creating spaces for innovation [. . .] We are a third-sector organization, for instance when we propose the public-private partnership [. . .], the local administrators often prefer to go with the “classic”. The crucial aspect is trying to remove those old concepts and those ways of managing public affairs. In our municipalities, we need people who have a vision». Interviewee GL

«We have worked a lot with the local administrations, there is often the actor that always did things the same way. I call him the ‘administrative bureaucrat’. He is afraid of changing because he does not know new dynamics . . . ». Interviewee MG

In BorgoFuturo, an interesting point concerns the relevant support played by the local administration, despite the presence of conflicts, tensions, and of different opinions on or understandings of project management or activities, which denotes a level of trust between the project promoters and the local administration.

«In Ripe, the administration in recent years has favored several processes. There is a mayor who . . . we often had different visions on things, but he has put his heart and soul into this village and many things have happened thanks to him as a person». Interviewee MG

«Borgofuturo [festival] has always made very trendy shows. I tried to accommodate many things, even those I didn’t understand, because I tried not to hinder

the wings of this movement. I supported so many things that I didn't understand or maybe I just didn't like. But I think it was a brave choice». Mayor PT

The interviewees also pointed out that one crucial factor for the success of the projects is the level of support provided by the community living in the locality. The three cases highlight the often ambiguous attitude of local inhabitants who initially do not react positively to project activities. One explanation lies in what interviewees call «resistance to change», which is interpreted as a normal approach characterizing Italian inner peripheries, even though this manifests in various ways across the three localities. In the case of Fondazione Ebbbio, one project promoter speaks about «a fear of change», which is typical of the locals and—more in general—of the local communities living in IP and that represents a real barrier to the emergence of innovation in the local context. In ArtePollino, the resistance to change is related to emotional fragility, which characterizes the inner periphery. As already mentioned previously, this is an attitude that manifests as resignation, indifference, and discouragement, as if «whatever we do, nothing would ever happen». As far as BorgoFuturo is considered, according to the project promoter, the resistance to change is associated with the so-called «ideology of conservation», which can have positive and negative connotations, respectively, in terms of the care that local communities give to the protection of natural and heritage elements of landscape and because it acts as a barrier to innovation. This results in a difficulty of integrating innovation and tradition in the locality.

Concerning the How of social innovation, in BorgoFuturo and ArtePollino, third-sector associations have acted in strong cooperation with a wide array of local actors, both institutional and community ones, through the establishment of collaborative middle-ground spaces that conveyed collective creating learning and implemented major objectives. Drawing on [23], middle-ground spaces are seen as socially innovative arenas, shaping bottom-linked governance interactions between actors from different political levels and spatial scales and mobilizing community participation (see also: [79]). Thus, middle-ground spaces are interpreted as devices for producing translocal learning, namely learning that is place focused, but not restricted to that place and involves ongoing labor in forging and developing connections between different sources, routes, and actors [81]. In particular, over the past 4 years, BorgoFuturo has operated to enlarge the arena of actors involved in the project, and this has coincided with a growing maturity of the project. It is interesting to notice that, in this case, the governance processes have mostly evolved in a horizontal direction (inter-municipal), visible both by the expansion of the festival to the three surrounding municipalities of the Fiastra valley and, more recently, with the creation of a participatory process involving several institutional, academic and civil society actors, made of a number of territorial roundtables that provided the basis for the elaboration of a local strategy for the regeneration of the valley [55,57]. The openness of the process and involvement of the local community are somehow distinctive features of ArtePollino, which are always found between the interaction with the local context—interpreted as a sort of «provocation of the territory»—the device for experimenting innovation, also in the field of public action.

«This experimentation was also a provocation to work on that feeling of resignation that characterizes the local community. Because in some cases it was really necessary to stimulate the territory. Here we would also need it in politics, in the institutions». Interviewee GL

This process of interaction involves not just local inhabitants as co-creators and beneficiaries of the cultural and art activities promoted by the association, but also other local institutions and cultural associations active in the territory as members of partnerships that create new projects and activities.

Fondazione Ebbbio has, until now, employed a more autonomous process, mostly focused on, on the one hand, building trust relationships with the small community of Ebbio and, on the other, gathering land and building properties needed to initiate project activities. The strong ties built over a long period of time by project promoters with the

community members allowed them to overcome the initial already mentioned resistance to change and achieve relatively unanimous support for the activities of the Foundation.

«Little by little we got to know the people in Ebbio [. . .] We've been there for 15 years and I think by now they've understood that we're there because we like it, because we simply want to be there. We've always taken part in the parties, the meetings . . . We took our time, our energies because we care about that, and then slowly a certain relationship was built. I think they more or less trust us by now». Interviewee AW

By focusing its activity just on the locality and restricting the process just to the actors living in that locality, interestingly, the case of Fondazione Ebbio shows a dimension of self-governance that points its emphasis on the autonomous capacity of local communities to generate empowerment and self-organize their collective action, following a pragmatic approach and shaping common objectives [82]. On the basis of this view, there is the idea that the development of that village depends, to a large extent, on how these internal forces and dynamics can self-organize to solve their problems and, in particular, to get out of the state of “lagging” [47].

5. Discussion

The identification of the three narratives has allowed us to understand how the territories and their actors frame themselves with respect to the condition of inner peripherality. While the first narrative deals with the economic status of inner peripheries and can be generalized to other peripheral contexts in Italy (and beyond), the other two narratives are more «place-sensitive» and deal with a combination of social and emotional factors that depends on the specific situation in which communities found themselves to live. Following [10], here, we take the view that the contents of the narratives of peripherality have an impact on the capacity of social innovation to emerge and develop because they influence the actors' understanding of values, justifications, meanings, and the levels of collective efficacy, namely the intersection between mutual trust, shared expectations among actors, and the willingness to intervene and interact in a given context [83,84].

Despite the contextual conditions' relevance in shaping SI, the analysis of the three projects has shown some common aspects, three of which are recalled here.

The first aspect is the role of triggers played by third-sector organizations in sustaining and promoting the emergence of SI in IP and in tackling individual and place-based disadvantage [22,45]. In the three cases, the third-sector organization is run by local actors with strong ties with the local community that built significant synergies with the local administration. The latter one has provided important financial resources and logistical support for the success of two of the three initiatives. As also shown by other scholars [12,46], the support of local administrators has proved to be crucial to ensuring that SI in IP produces relevant outcomes, making the provocation successful.

The creation of significant collaborative middle-ground spaces [43,85] for conveying collective creative learning and involving local communities in the projects—often within a co-production perspective—is the second common aspect. Despite the different degrees of formality characterizing these spaces (from the spontaneous social interaction of Fondazione Ebbio to the structured participatory roundtables of Borgofuturo) and the profile that the governance has assumed in the three cases, these spaces have turned out to be useful devices for shaping bottom-linked governance interactions between actors from different political levels and spatial scales and for mobilizing community participation.

A third common element between the projects is the central role played by spatial capital in generating social innovation. In Section 4.2, we pointed out that the novel mobilization of existing unused or underused spatial assets by SI is one of the outcomes of the act of provocation. Projects have thus contributed to mobilize material resources that the local community did not perceive as exploitable, whose value was hidden or latent (for more on this, see: [86,87]) on the basis of different strategies:

- By including external knowledge and an alternative (pragmatic) approach to set up the exchange of agricultural land between farmers and acquire and restore abandoned buildings and ruins to settle down new functions and activities in a semi-abandoned rural village, such as in Fondazione Ebbbio;
- By creating a coalition of actors from different levels and sectors that has worked synergically with the local administration to revitalize a shrinking historical center and reuse vacant spaces for new economic activities, such as in Borgofuturo;
- By taking advantage of an external funding program to set up a collective learning process and create a community facility that provides specific welfare services, shaping local inhabitants' empowerment, strengthening social networks, and organizing a rich cultural and recreational program, such as in ArtePollino. This case also demonstrates that a SI initiative can have a positive role in sustaining social service innovation and in addressing emerging social needs of a peripheral community [12,27,88].

The reasons for relevant differences of the strategies found in each locality relate to the specific nexus created between the typologies of actors present in the locality, the existing patterns of territorial assets, and the capacity of those actors to mobilize those assets, as well as the governance and regulatory framework underlying the strategy process. In other terms, the existence of territorial configurations that link the complexity of individual choices with spatial factors, social needs, and regulatory elements influences the emergence of SI and the capacity to reveal latent or unexploited resources, guiding communities to make the most of their inherent features. This refers to what the authors of [29] (p. 356) underlined as «the efforts of local actors to create, exploit, supplement and replenish local asset bases and to transform liabilities into assets».

A noteworthy aspect regarding the mobilization of material assets concerns the role that innovative procedural and management settings have had in boosting the reuse of these assets. For instance, in Borgofuturo the low rental fees set up by the local administration after a negotiation process with project promoters have allowed to highlight the public collective value of material assets over their mere economic revenues and to valorize the positive externalities the new activities have for the regeneration and revitalization of the shrinking historical center [52,87]. This confirms what was already pointed out by several scholars [12,53,63] concerning the crucial role that the public action—specifically the one practiced by local governments—plays in sustaining and shaping SI in IP, despite the relevant administrative and knowledge barriers highlighted by the interviewees. In other words, in IP, social innovation appears to be closely related to the forms and spaces of public innovation that can be created within local administrations [89]. This is consistent with what was underlined by the authors of [90]: that the success of SI practices is often the outcome of an institutional learning process that increases local institutions' resources, extends their reach, and radically transforms and improves the way they operate. This aspect is specifically true for the Italian domestic context where the municipal level, despite the new reconfiguration introduced by austerity and rescaling reforms [91], still plays a relevant role in managing resources and services, shaping social and economic restructuring, and supporting the emergence of innovative initiatives.

6. Conclusions

This article has investigated the dynamics of SI in IP through the analysis of policy documents and innovative projects taking place in three different contexts of the Italian Apennine. By doing so, it aimed to produce new knowledge about the contribution that SI initiatives can make to contrast territorial marginalization.

The research has demonstrated that the narratives recognized in the policy documents and tested through the interviews reflect a process of 'making meaning', which strongly influences the capacity of local actors to initiate trajectories of SI. Moreover, the cross-case study analysis of the three projects highlighted that social innovation in IP has emerged as an act of territorial provocation practiced by a coalition of actors that materialized a reaction by the local community to the so-called "wanna be" feeling, namely a sense of constriction

and frustration linked to conditions of physical and social isolation, welfare retrenchment, and a lack of future perspectives characterizing the locality. This demonstrates what was already stated by the authors of [25]: that only those rural villages that possess the capacity to «take the local problems into their hands» and turn this capacity into a reaction are likely to be capable of adapting and adjusting to the spiraling-down effect of peripherality.

One issue that the three case studies elicit concerns the strong dependency of SI emergence on the political class running the local government and on the strategic priorities set up by the administration in a certain period of time. The action of each local government has a limited temporal duration, which in Italy is strongly related to the five-year mandate. This aspect makes the time factor crucial, and political turnover is a condition that often clashes with the need of SI and community-based projects and initiatives for a steady and stable institutional framework. To overcome this issue, here, we take the view that the presence of a solid strategic planning framework that is collectively and transparently constructed may support the emergence of SI initiatives in IP and sustain them in a stable and durable way. This view is also supported by the authors of [23], who argued that just when the planning framework of a rural region becomes inclusive and enables and creates an effective space for collaboration, social innovation initiatives can contribute to systemic change. There are two relevant aspects to be mentioned. Firstly, to work effectively, the strategic planning framework needs to be coupled with a system of framework rules, namely rules that supply a general framework for development that is simple and relational, that leaves room for spontaneously emerging socio-spatial patterns, and that is kept open to dynamic adjustments [82]. Secondly, it is important that the strategic planning is conveyed through multiple arenas of open confrontation, translocal learning, and co-production between external and local actors and that this continuous interaction is of advantage not just for facilitating the emergence of the already mentioned “provocations” in the field of social innovation and territorial development (and beyond), but more importantly, for shaping the capacity of local communities to learn from these provocations and build a better future.

It is intended that the findings included in this article may provide useful arguments for future research about SI in IP, and specifically, they may inform the initiative of a wide array of actors that wish to engage in SI projects in Italian marginalized rural areas. Nevertheless, a number of questions arises from this article. Will the projects be able to generate positive impacts in the long term? How will one assess them? Additionally and more importantly: Can the findings obtained from the case studies be generalized to other inner peripheries beyond Italy? What extra-local factors can be identified to foster social innovation in IP?

Following [21], here, we take the view that it appears to be controversial to draw generalizations and systematize and replicate SI initiatives from one geographical context to another. The reasons lie in the fact that SI emerges under specific conditions, in specific contexts, and addresses specific needs. This is the reason why social innovation usually requires a solid framework, where coalitions of local and external actors can pull together the local resources present in a locality and transform them into opportunities for local development.

Moreover, the context where these initiatives have been investigated, inner peripheries, is a heterogenous and multidimensional geography, which presents relevant differences across Europe [61]. Each inner periphery shows a certain substrate of contextual social, economic, and institutional conditions and path-dependent dynamics that are difficult to generalize. For this reason, we believe that inner peripheries require tailored-made and place-sensitive policies that seize the potential of every place, avoiding the risk of one-fits-all approaches, overcoming the false trade-offs between efficiency and equity, and responding to the structural opportunities, potential, and constraints present in each place [8]. Additionally, more research is needed to explore the crucial role played by the local administration in sustaining the emergence of SI in IP to demonstrate if this is also valid in other inner peripheral territories in Europe. The research carried out in other

domestic contexts, where local governments have different roles and degrees of autonomy in the institutional landscape, may lead to different outcomes, and it may underline a different configuration of the relationships between public action, private sector, and social enterprises.

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