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Grounding social innovation: a methodological approach to the legacy of urban regeneration on civic actions

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the role of social innovation practices in their relationship with public institutions. The research presents an in-depth analysis of civic actions promoting social innovation in Turin (Italy). In the last few decades, the city has been praised as an example of urban regeneration characterized by a collaborative framework between self-organized initiatives and public authorities. The paper discusses the definition of social innovation and its features in an evolving context, presenting the challenges that these practices face. A grounded methodological approach is proposed, defining the term, which is always situated within the socio-material processes in which it is immersed.

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Social innovation; urban regeneration; urban practices; civic actions; Turin

1. Introduction

In urban studies, the role of the public in steering urban regeneration processes has been at the core of a continuous and never-ending debate. This paper recognizes the controversies characterizing the discussion and proposes a pragmatist approach with a grounded and situated perspective. It proposes to examine how social innovation (SI) is exercized by urban and civic practices, recognizing it as a highly territorialized and deeply processual phenomenon. Being contextual, the research looks at the relations established and the processes performed.

SI remains an open and contested term: on the one hand, it is used in academic and policy debates to promote the activities of voluntary, non-statutory and citizen-led initiatives that deliver goods beyond the state; on the other hand, it has been criticized for legitimizing the withdrawal of local governments from public responsibility. Scholars have shown that it may encompass both SI activities in their ends and their means (Van Dyck and Van Den Broeck 2013), but also that it is often overused, losing analytical precision as it can be applied to a broad range of initiatives (Bragaglia 2021; Grimm et al. 2013). It has been questioned as having a 'Janus Face' (Swyngedouw 2005): the term is at the same time endorsed for its flexibility and adaptability to the local context and criticized for its vagueness. This paper embraces a grounded and nuanced definition of SI

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(Moulaert et al. 2005; Moulaert et al. 2014) that focuses on its processual and relational dimensions, where institutional frameworks, community practices and peculiar spatial dimensions produce specific modes of governance and participation, always grounded in their local context. SI happens in a contingent manner, and it is precisely the specific, *ad hoc* dynamics that characterize single civic practices that are the object of this paper.

Building on this debate, the research holds a pragmatic position and a contextual approach: SI is a situated practice that is historically, materially, socially and institutionally produced. The presented study is thus guided by the following research question: How is social innovation made operative through local civic actions? What criteria can be used to make a fuzzy concept land on the ground and become operative? To answer these questions, an in-depth analysis and observation of local civic actions have been conducted.

The metropolitan area of Turin (Italy) has been chosen as a particularly revealing context for inquiring into the evolution of collaborative practices in their relationship with institutions. Indeed, during the 1990s, the city was praised for the dialectical attitude of the local government towards local 'bottom-up' initiatives, as well as for its strong role in promoting innovative urban regeneration programs. Turin has been recognized as innovative for its ability to match physical interventions with immaterial and social actions. After 25 years, the large amount of EU funding and the national and regional governments' interest in urban regeneration has strongly decreased. Nevertheless, in the city, several practices act as a legacy of that urban regeneration season, showing a peculiar local context. Turin's landscape has long been recognized as a laboratory for urban policy experiments (Pede 2024), and the legacy of this experimental season is part of the inquiry that has helped ground the research in practice.

This paper delves into these processes using the lenses of SI practices, so it positions itself in the debate about SI within urban planning discourses: the authors use the analytical methodology to unpack how a fuzzy term, such as 'social innovation', can be made operative to land on the ground and see what kind of practices fall under the given definition of SI to present how they function in practice. Therefore, a literature review of the term is discussed in the second section of the paper, and an operative proposal of its meaning is suggested. Then, in the third section, the Turin case study is presented and described. The fourth section concerns the research methodology: by examining the mechanisms that enabled some practices to secure funding (between 2017 and 2024), the paper questions recent urban regeneration initiatives and analyzes how SI practices became stabilized partners in those processes. In sections 4.1 and 4.2, the methodology is applied to present and analyse four clusters of recent Turin SI practices. The practices are seen through the lens of the proposed analytical framework. Moreover, in the fifth section, thanks to these grounded and stabilized examples, the authors discuss the shifting relations between public authorities and third sector stakeholders and highlight the increasingly emergent role of Foundations of Bank Origins in fostering local development projects. In the final section, the authors reflect on SI, its characteristics, and some remarks about the applied methodology.

2. Social innovation in its spatial effects: a fuzzy term to look at spatial practices

Social innovation (SI) has significant relevance in the current world; this term is often used to justify and sustain local practices. However, as a buzzword, it has rarely been

described in its operative characteristics or evaluated in its operational features. In urban planning, SI is crucial for understanding the local practices related to bottom-up innovations and experiments like civic actions, local welfare and pilot projects. So, its definition and analysis are urgent to better understand urban practices.

In the scientific literature, SI has been extensively used to discuss the interplay of political and cultural dynamics across different scales and structures to drive social change and foster socially 'innovative' initiatives (Manzini 2015; Moulaert et al. 2014): it is recognized not to have a straightforward definition (Mulgan et al. 2007) but it generally encompasses the innovative activities that are social in both their end and their means (Van Dyck and Van Den Broeck 2013). Its use has also been criticized, as it removes the complexity of what the 'social' might be (Latour 2005) or even the potential for 'innovation' itself (Godin and Vinck 2017).

Within urban and planning discourses dealing with SI, the concept has largely been depicted as a 'magic concept' (Bragaglia 2021) and a 'holy grail' (Vigar, Cowie, and Healey 2020), used so much that it was 'at its breaking point' (Grimm et al. 2013) already more than a decade ago. Yet, it is among the most used terms in policymaking documents and other grey literature (Howaldt et al. 2014). Even within the research field itself, which partly criticizes it (Micelli, Ostanel, and Lazzarini 2023), there is a common understanding of it as a term paradoxically both endorsed and hindered, thus having a 'double bind' (Bartels 2017).

SI is an inherently territorialized concept (MacCallum et al. 2016; Van Dyck and Van Den Broeck 2013).

Urban studies and practices have been identified as one of the main 'incubators' of SI itself (Moulaert and Van Den Broeck 2018) because, regardless of the term's positive or negative connotations, the territory functions as the test ground where innovation may occur. Within spatial discourses, SI is therefore explored in its dual dimension: bonded with grassroots practices and bottom-up initiatives as a dynamic phenomenon always rooted in its socio-political context (Brignone et al. 2022; García and Pradel 2019), or as a keyword in policy-making and governmental projects (Arampatzi 2022) within the broader paradigm of co-production (Hambleton 2014; Ostanel 2023).

Particularly, it has been seen as an ideological and neoliberal term once coupled with win-win rhetoric promoted by the European Union policies and discourses (Fougère, Segercrantz, and Seeck 2017), yet recognized to be operative because it is multidimensional, covering a broad range of alternative solutions for human needs (such as access to resources and rights, health care, education, employment, cultural rights and housing) that are not fully met by the public nor by market logics (Galego et al. 2022). To overcome the neoliberal ability to neutralize and absorb critiques within its own framework, Moulaert et al. (2005, 2007) propose a more radical interpretation of SI, which focuses on the relationality of the term and thus looks at power-relation dynamics that allow or hinder specific projects, and at the overall process that concerns SI practices, also in their controversies. SI is never about a singular action, but the whole process that concerns the practice is at stake, even in its contradictions. This is also why bridging the discourse to its spatial dimension becomes crucial, as it deals with the multi-scalarity of the urban.

Thus, concerning urban regeneration, SI has yet to be discussed as an enabling concept for public action, particularly when coupled with creating 'soft spaces' that

foster collaboration between third sector actors and institutions (Lazzarini and Pacchi 2024). In this paper, we embrace a pragmatic position, giving the term an operative understanding, as it is historically and materially produced, always contingent yet relational (McFarlane et al. 2023). SI concerns both urban processes and urban practices (Moulaert and Mehmood 2020) and is always rooted in a place-specific context; therefore, it will be through the unfolding of the local context and the presentation of the specific SI practices that the concept can be operative. The attempt here has been to articulate a definition of SI that extends beyond the simple provision of public or welfare services, thereby avoiding equating SI practices with service delivery models that merely compensate for declining public funding. Given the haziness of the term itself, as the multiplicity of actions that SI practices propose, a certain degree of ambiguity is recurrent, and the boundary between a welfare state in decline and the rise of civic actions that could be considered socially innovative is blurred.

3. Turin, a city in between

Turin is a second-tier city in north-west Italy, with around 800,000 inhabitants. It has historically been considered the Italian one-company town thanks to the strong presence and role of the FIAT car industry (Caruso, Pede, and Rossignolo 2019). In the last few decades, the city has struggled with its economic identity, transitioning from a grounded, defined past of industrial manufacturing to an uncertain future amid the tertiary transition that all European cities experienced at the end of the twentieth century. Turin has a metropolitan scale, with the two rings of municipalities (for a total population of 1.5 million inhabitants) influenced by its dynamics and trends.

From a perspective of urban policy and planning, while the last (and current) Turin Masterplan was adopted in 1995, launching a process of substantial real estate investment, transforming dismissed industrial sites into urban developments, favouring private properties interested in housing and commercial activities, in the same years, the local administration has also focused on an urban regeneration policy. This priority has been the core of the public urban policy since the 1990s, following the integrated approach proposed by the EU URBAN Program. This urban regeneration policy was implemented through an operational change: the creation of a specific unit in the city council called *Progetto Speciale Periferie* (PSP, Special Peripheries Project) (Governa, Rossignolo, and Saccomani 2009), involving civil servants with diverse and sectoral specificities (social services, housing, green areas, police service, building activities, etc.) to build a common and integrated approach to deal with the most neglected neighbourhoods in the city (Barbanente et al. 2022). This unit addressed several peripheral areas of Turin, responding to various calls for projects and programmes and securing funding at the regional, national and European levels. Urban regeneration initiatives called 'complex programmes involve physical interventions, social and economic actions with an area-based approach and an emphasis on public–private partnerships and citizens' participation (Governa and Saccomani 2004). This season of urban regeneration enabled the development of a set of new competences in the local public administration and stakeholders in terms of partnership and forms of cooperation, skills in promoting and implementing integrated actions (social, economic and physical renewal) and in the development of proposals (Barbanente et al. 2022).

This change in Turin local urban policies was studied in the literature (Caruso, Pede, and Rossignolo 2019; Governa and Rossignolo 2010). Considering its paradigmatic character, it is also widely acknowledged in the rest of Italian cities. In 2006, the PSP became a permanent part of the city's administration, called the 'Peripheries Service'. Then, the international financial crisis of 2007–08 and austerity policies shifted national and regional priorities, and such urban regeneration interventions were mainly undertaken by regional authorities and funded by the EU Structural Funds (Albanese et al. 2021). The context for these integrated interventions in Italian cities strongly changed (Barbanente et al. 2022). Those actions mainly promoted by the public authorities became residual, while bottom-up initiatives driven by groups, associations and local self-organized urban laboratories kept the ratio developed during the 'complex programs' era (Ostanel 2017; Rabbiosi 2016), in a frame of cooperation with public authorities but with scarce interaction within the planning domain. The definition of urban regeneration became a buzzword and was less and less linked to an area-based integrated approach (Barbanente et al. 2022).

In Turin, from the 2000s onward, those bottom-up initiatives were the legacy of the urban regeneration competencies. A scenario of a consistent presence of civic actions and SI practices, smooth and non-conflictual, was created through a widespread process that avoids tensions and aims to generate a distributed consensus. At the same time, the regional role decreased, and the last urban programs were mainly directed by the national state (Saccomani 2019). Saccomani stresses that what was missing in Turin was a strong, coherent role for the public authority, which instead sought to level and erase social conflict. This attitude, which was also meant to enhance social movements and prioritize single actions, ended up being fragmented. This patchwork of initiatives and incentives is recognized as one threat to SI policies (Vicari Haddock 2018). It has also been discussed as one of Turin's main weaknesses in urban regeneration programmes (Saccomani 2019).

The bottom-up initiatives have had other consequences: legitimizing the public administration's withdrawal from service provision, scarce funding for urban policies, and leaving several social and public demands to the third sector's response (such as housing and social services). Additionally, another subject entered the welfare domain with more resources: the Foundations of Banking Origins (FOBs),[1] which fund (and co-fund) bottom-up practices and public services, often through a call for project mechanisms. These entities also support the work of third-sector organizations. Nevertheless, the main problem with FOBs' involvement in public policy is that they don't respond to public demands or promote the public good, while they have a private set of priorities.

4. How to operationalize social innovation: a methodological approach

The starting point of the methodology has been collecting a consistent body of SI practices. The lenses of SI have been chosen as conceptual companions because of their focus on specific local contexts, which allows us to look at their uses and effects in practice (Crosta 2010).

The research embraces a pragmatic position that sees the 'social' itself as constantly constructed depending on the specific practices that display, represent, account and enact it (Marres, Guggenheim, and Wilkie 2018): changes and innovation within the practices happen in a *continuum* and are generated by the 'institutional work and the

normative accountability' of the practices themselves (Gherardi and Strati 2012). It draws on practice-based studies (among others, Bruni 2014; Gherardi 2006; Kimbell 2018) with a social material perspective (Mol 2002) and proposes a definition of innovation that is always contingent and entangled with the practices in which it is immersed.

An inductive qualitative approach has been adopted, considering the practices for operationalizing the concept of SI itself. Then, the research has applied a mixed methodology, combining desk research, analysis of primary and secondary sources and documents, 10 extended semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders, and an analysis of practices in their spatial relationships.

Within this methodological framework (see Figure 1), the first step has been to choose a contingent definition of SI practices, which has emerged from literature and praxis. SI has been employed as an operational criterion, but also based on the literature: practices of SI are understood as generating localized forms of change, offering contingent solutions that respond to unmet social needs within local communities. These local organizations generally perform civic actions with a self-organized and explorative character. Their actions mostly come from the bottom but often involve public authorities and other local governmental institutions. These practices are carried out with a hybrid attitude that holds together some controversies regarding their explorative character. To a certain extent, the civic actions proposed are indeed explorative in their content, in how they strive to respond to societal needs, and in their projects. But at the same time, the subjects (collectives or individuals) that enact these mechanisms generally have a consistent level of experience and are hardly emergent.

These practices usually operate within or alongside public policies and mechanisms, participate in initiatives promoted by social-economy actors, and are frequently embedded within existing institutional networks.

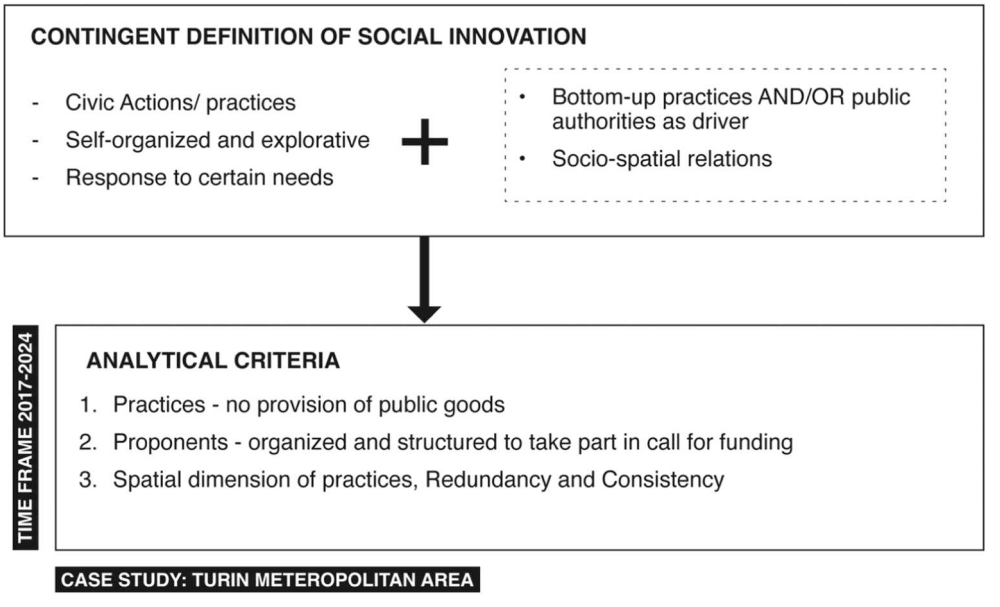

Figure 1. Scheme of the methodology employed.

The innovation performed by the practices happens in a situated, local, and given space and concerns both the material aspects of a certain urban regeneration, particularly its socio-spatial dimension.

The operative meaning of the term becomes clear through the unfolding of the research method that has constructed the analysis carried out in the metropolitan area of Turin. The criteria to choose and then analyse SI practices were developed step by step, addressing three main dimensions of SI practices (so becoming three criteria) and then adding a time frame and a specific area of interest of the case study. As depicted in Figure 1, the three criteria can be summarized as follows: 1. The activities offered by the practices, which should not have the provision of public goods as the first scope (so not substituting public welfare); 2. The organizational structure of the practices, or rather, how much the SI practice is already structured; 3. The spatial dimension of the practices is their capability to insist on a specific territory.

The research has focused on services offered where local practices do not act as a substitute for the welfare state itself; thus, the first selection has excluded the provision of public basic goods or charitable initiatives. The reason is that the research objective has not been to examine practices replacing the welfare state, but rather how those practices emerge and offer alternative or parallel services to public ones. Nevertheless, the blurry boundaries between the activities that these SI practices propose make it hard to draw a clear distinction. The research has thus striven to avoid any evident overlapping practices, such as those offering, for example, solely housing or healthcare services. At the same time, some minor service experiences, or those that also provide public goods but do not have these as their core activities, have also been included in the analysis.

The debate is still ongoing. Civic actions proposing SI have been discussed to sometimes offer an alternative to a welfare state in decline (Martinelli 2013) but have also been pointed out as part of a more general withdrawal of the state from certain domains that are consequently also transferred to civil society organizations, giving rise to forms of 'governance beyond the state' (Swyngedouw 2005): this trend has characterized the city of Turin itself, being the badge of local authorities losing their steering role in the provision of publicness. Indeed, some of the civic action practices analysed offer the services that would fall under the definition of public goods and services, such as alternative housing models, health services, or school labs.

The second criterion relates to the profile of the SI practices' proponents: the chosen experiences are generally launched by structured entities and organizations. These are structured enough to apply for funding proposed by the different European, national and local calls within a specific time frame. Therefore, the second criterion helps define SI better, given that the institutional body requests innovation. Through a desk analysis, the inquiry has looked at recent funding programs promoted by public and private actors supplied in the Piedmont Region from 2017 until 2024, particularly focusing on Turin, the region's capital, in its metropolitan area. The funding agency would generally ask the proponent to foresee expenses and sustain itself until the end of the project.

The different calls comprised, but were not limited to, the ones promoted by the European Commission as Next Generation EU falling into the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan; specific national calls by the Italian Minister of Culture, such as the 'Creative Living Lab,' which enacted funding from 2018 until 2023 for processes of

urban regeneration in Italian peripheries or the National Fund for Social Innovation, which had granted 54% of its total budget to not-for-profit associations (Tricarico 2024), have also been taken into consideration. Among the local ones, the research has looked at WeCare, the Piedmont strategy for social innovation, which financed 20 million euros for innovative action for territorial welfare, and 'Torino Social Factory, the strategy proposed by the city in the innovation field, which granted a total of 1.5 million euros for 15 projects of 'regenerative welfare'.[2] The biggest local FOB, *Compagnia di San Paolo,* particularly stood out since 2017 for its declared ambition of 'promoting subject, think tank for policies and a philanthropic and innovative operator' (Arrigoni 2024, 225). Indeed, this selection criterion has been related to the ability of the practices to initiate a process of instituting (Li Destri Nicosia and Saija 2025), both in their interactions with funding authorities and with local public administrations.

The third criterion concerns the local relevance of the urban practices, a spatial dimension of their impact, and, at the same time, it is considered consistent and redundant, meaning it would appear recurrently as a localized actor, a symptom of its grounding in its local context.

After defining the criteria, the research cross-referenced the information retrieved from the desk research with the specific criteria to scrutinize the emerging landscape of SI practices active in the chosen metropolitan area. Activities were selected if they had a local impact on the territory in which they were intervening, for instance, networks of practices that were not localized or, on the contrary, were rather territorialized and grounded in their surroundings, mainly thanks to a given physical space functioning as a meeting point or a hub. Criteria of redundancy in the practice's appearance, as a winner of multiple fundings and consistency of actions strengthen the validation of the research, which was then informed by an in-depth desk analysis of the selected practices' websites and social media accounts.

These three selection criteria, which we still recognized to be subjective (the research group previously defined the criteria used, but were not enabled by a qualitative approach) and partial (personal networks also apprised the local focus), were also limited because all the practices not funded by the chosen calls and programs escaped from the selection.

Then, the time frame was chosen mainly to check the stabilization of recent practices from 2017 to 2024: before and after the pandemic crisis, and practices that have been part of specific local dynamics to look at how those have been changing throughout the years. But together with this practice-oriented reason, 2017 could be considered, symbolically, a year wherein the civic actions performed by the SI practices became, in the analysed territory, tightened with its quest for structure, primarily because of a growing and diffuse interest in coupling SI actions with the possibility to become, at one moment, an economically valuable investment, as a recent study argues (Arrigoni 2024).[3]

Practices falling under the given and yet contingent SI definition are thus at least partly – if not entirely – embedded within structure and well-presented logics that pursue civic solidarity action with a non-profit social aim.

4.1. Social innovative practices in practice

To unpack how SI functions in action, the research has focused on the emergent practices from the desk analysis and the selection by applying the three criteria to the practices

promoted in the Turin metropolitan area between 2017 and 2024. Accordingly, 58 practices were evaluated as consistent and mapped, and contingent considerations were made concerning the Turin context. Then, 10 in-depth interviews were conducted with actors embedded within the observed practices. The interviews have been performed to unpack the mechanism and focalize the issues at stake for the civic initiatives themselves: development of the practices, role of the proponent, network and relations in the area, difficulties and strengths.

Both during the selection and mapping phase and the interviews phase, clusters of initiatives were first identified and then confirmed or discussed. These clusters have an operative function and sharpen the given definition of SI practices; they have been constructed according to categories of the practices and the network they insist on. The lenses used have focused primarily on the relations established with the public administration they interact with, key factors that facilitate or hamper communication with local authorities, funding programmes and the economic feasibility of the SI practices.

The four clusters that emerged could be summarized as follows (Table 1):

- A network of established social hubs that work in a cooperative way with local authorities and FOBs, providing services, events and spaces to the citizens at the neighbourhood scale. The network is called *Case di Quartiere di Torino* (Turin Neighbourhood Houses). We studied the network, the hub in the San Salvario neighbourhood and another hub called *Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè*. This network has been chosen as a practice of SI due to its long-lasting relationship with the Municipality of Turin.
- Civic practices offering community services and activities to the citizens from different organizations (from voluntary to a precise structure): *Via Baltea Community Hub, Aris Mirafiori* and *Portinerie di Comunità*. These practices are not established in a network but work individually as mediators between public authorities and citizens.
- The 'rural' cluster, where all the activities that are rooted in agricultural practices have been grouped, and generally practices that are established outside the city; not every practice would adopt an agricultural feature, but these are usually related to the rural environment, particularly in the relationship established with local authorities; the examples are *Dalla Stessa Parte* and *Cascina Caccia*. The selected practices generally emphasize communities that operate with different structures and mechanisms from urban ones. Power structures and relations are acknowledged to operate

Table 1. Clusters of social innovation practices in the metropolitan area of Turin and a general overview of the interviews carried out.

Cluster	Social innovation practice
#1 Network of social houses	*Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè*
	Casa di Quartiere di San Salvario
#2 Differentiated social practices	*Via Baltea Community Hub*
	Aris
	Portinerie di Comunità
#3 Rural practices	*Dalla Stessa Parte*
	Cascina Caccia
#4 Hybrid practices	*CISS 38*
	Patti di Collaborazione

differently in these contexts; being a smaller local community fosters a different relationship with public authorities, which are generally more easily influenced by personal relations. Nevertheless, or even because of that, they are examples of SI mainly due to the community work they propose.

- A fourth cluster includes hybrid practices, generally examples of public and third sector actors collaborating. We interviewed *CISS 38*, a consortium on the outskirts of the Turin metropolitan area, an example of a shared administration model in providing public services. To better explore collaborative forms of SI practice, insights from the *Beni Comuni* office in Turin (the city's Urban Commons office) have also been included.

For each cluster, two or three practices were studied and analysed through 10 semi-structured interviews, which helped frame the discussion with an informed perspective (Table 1). For each interview, particular attention was given to the type of SI implemented and the relation established with the public administration and other local institutions. An in-depth focus was also directed to the practice's financial sustainability and its organization.

An additional interview with a programme manager of the FOB *Compagnia di San Paolo,* responsible for the mission 'Fostering Active Participation', who has overseen several recent funding initiatives targeting third sector practices – as, for instance, the call 'Space', that has allocated €5 million between 2021 and 2023 to 100 selected entities across the Italian north-western regions of Piedmont, Valle d'Aosta and Liguria. Interviewed after the practices, the manager confirmed that the FOB prioritizes and encourages highly professionalized SI practices, with a minimum degree of project management skills and a consistent level of internal structural organization, which are valued as potentially full-fledged economic actors capable of generating their own resources, thus characterized by entrepreneurial improvements.

4.2. Analysis and results

The first cluster encompasses the *Case di Quartiere*, a network of eight neighbourhood houses that have emerged since the early 2000s as locally embedded infrastructures for civic engagement. Each house operates in a distinct neighbourhood, offering context-specific services that respond to territorial needs—from after-school programs to support for vulnerable groups. Beyond functioning as venues for associations, the *Case di Quartiere* perform what could be defined as a 'third function': they mobilize and strengthen local resources and networks of active citizenship. Legally recognized as a network since 2017, they represent an institutionalized form of SI grounded in long-standing collaboration between the municipality and civic actors engaged in Turin's urban regeneration processes.

The second cluster includes community-based organizations that share a territorial mission but follow different organizational models. *Via Baltea*, a cooperative hub in Barriera di Milano, a northern city neighbourhood, combines entrepreneurial management with a civic purpose, integrating profit and non-profit structures to sustain social activities while maintaining formal recognition by the municipality. On the other hand, *Aris* in Mirafiori Sud, in the southern outskirts, could be considered a fragile but consolidated

practice: it is sustained mainly by volunteers and depends mostly on small public loans. *Aris* provides mutual-exchange services, connecting elderly residents, migrants and students in a neighbourhood affected by socio-economic fractures. A third example, the *Portinerie di Comunità*, blends public, private and third-sector partnerships through small, multifunctional 'reception' spaces that offer free and paid services, creating a replicable model of territorial activation based on flexible co-management.

The third cluster concerns civic practices rooted in peripheral and rural contexts, where SI often addresses marginalization and fosters local development. The research has reached *Dalla Stessa Parte*, a long-standing cooperative in Ciriè, that integrates social inclusion and entrepreneurship through job creation for vulnerable people. It has discussed its adaptive capacity and growing autonomy from public dependency. Similarly, *Cascina Caccia* is a seized asset from organized crime that combines co-housing and educational initiatives within a strong anti-mafia and community-building framework. These experiences demonstrate how rural civic actions link social innovation with territorial identity within a solidarity framework.

Finally, the fourth cluster focuses on hybrid and institutionalized collaborations between public and civic actors, mainly initiated by the local public institutions. *CISS 38*, a consortium of 41 municipalities in the Canavese area, promotes welfare co-production through participatory planning aligned with regional law within the National Recovery and Resilience Plan funding, which is positioned as a public actor that particularly strives to innovate in governance models. Similarly, the City of Turin's *Ufficio Beni Comuni* (Urban Commons Office) institutionalizes co-management mechanisms through the *Patti di Collaborazione* (Collaboration Pacts), enabling civic groups to manage and regenerate publicly owned spaces legally.

Together, these clusters show a multi-scalar ecosystem of SI practices in which civic, hybrid and institutional actors co-produce innovation, manage space and implement participation. Table 2 analyzes and compares the cases according to the three SI operational criteria discussed in Figure 1.

5. Discussion: Turin landscape of practices

The landscape of SI practices that emerges from the analysis depicts a territory wherein the long-lasting relationship between third-sector organizations and the municipal administration presents an overall appeased scenario of established practices in what has been defined as a co-productive framework (Albrechts 2013; Ostanel 2023). Yet, this collaborative and pacified condition opens the question of who is taken out of these logics, and which mechanisms include or exclude the practices within this framework. Moreover, the overall precarious financial stability of the analysed practices has stressed the relevance and urgency of further inquiry into their funding mechanisms and FOB influences on their stability.

The Turin context presents a high concentration of practices falling under the given definition of SI, which are generally established by local stakeholders. These actors, able to run funding programmes, prepare budgets and forecast costs, must be structured and well-organized. Indeed, all the selected practices are promoted by organizations that have existed for more than five years and that are recognized stakeholders within the city. A second reflection arises concerning Turin's path-dependent dynamics. On the one hand,

Table 2. Social innovation practices in the metropolitan area of Turin analysed according to the operational criteria.

SI cluster	SI practice	Type of provision of goods	Proponents' structure	Spatial dimension
Network of social hubs	*Bagni Pubblici di Via Agliè Casa di Quartiere di San Salvario*	- Every house is active in a specific neighbourhood; - Every house offers contingent solutions to the territory it insists on; - Activities span from free after school courses to welfare services for specific vulnerable targets (e.g. showers for homeless people).	- The network has been active since the early 2000s. - It was born out of the long legacy built from the collaboration between the Urban Regeneration Department of the Municipality of Turin and several activists, researchers, and local citizens. - In 2017, it became a legal entity. - It gives institutional recognition to the singular houses and their initiatives; - Its a strategic partner in the implementation of Turin public policies (social, urban, etc.)	- Every house represents a space in which the network of associations performs the task of attracting, engaging and strengthening the local resources of active citizenship; - Each house rents a municipal space, previously vacant, with a specific agreement and fee.
Civic practices offering community services	*Via Baltea Community Hub*	- It offers a broad range of activities. - Activities span from economically accessible after-school and summer courses to the active lobbying for the pedestrianization of the street in front of the building - It runs a front-desk support service.	- Community hub; - Co-management between 10 partners with different legal natures and structures; - Its board is comprised of cooperatives, associations, not-for-profit, singular individuals and informal groups; - Entrepreneurial structure with a civic purpose; - Main funds come from the sub-rent of the community spaces and a café; - Since 2014, the official partner of the city for youth policies and urban regeneration; - Led by a professional team.	- It acts as a territorial hub as it embraces a strong commitment towards the local context.
	Aris	- It offers vacant apartments to foreign students, creating a mix in the neighbourhood. - It strives to propose a broad range of social activities to fill the void left by public policies. - The activities are mostly coming from the community of inhabitants themselves.	- Led mainly by volunteers. - Struggles to get structured. - Misses the capacity-building efforts to stabilize itself; - Finds it hard to engage in projects due to procedural uncertainties; - Struggles to anticipate the funds.	- The association rents publicly owned spaces. - It sustains itself 70% with a yearly loan from the city. - Through a collaboration agreement, the association manages a local public garden in partnership with other local organizations. - Services offered are ad hoc constructed for the territorial needs.
	Portinerie di Comunità	- Hybrid status; - A mix of free and paid activities and services for the citizens. - Community and administrative services, forms of legal support to the citizens; - Paid activities according to the individual funds.	- Entrepreneurial model; - The model is contextual yet reproducible. - Based on a public-private partnership	- Combination of third sector organizations, public services and private initiatives in one space (networking and aggregative function); - centripetal logic;

				- They offer the organizational and logistical structure that may be lack in the territory.
Rural activities	*Dalla Stessa Parte*	- It supports vulnerable people entering the job market. - Employment office (funded by the region); - It participates in public calls for the maintenance of urban green and local parks; - Tailoring laboratory. - Social farming; - Honey production.	- Established in 1983; - The right to work is the main aim (not changed during the years); - The commercial activities make the cooperative less dependent on public funding or co-production mechanisms. - Striving to improve its entrepreneurial activities.	- Long -lasting relation with the territory; - The encounter with local authorities is easier and direct.
	Cascina Caccia	- Seized and confiscated assets from organized crime; - It offers co-housing models among different young target groups (e.g. experimenting co-living between activists and migrants); - It offers educational activities. - It hosts events for the community (workshops, and summer camps); - It takes part in the local mutual-aid networks.	- Cooperation between public, private and third-sector actors; - Part of a national network that helps with the legal procedures and oversees the general well-being of the asset's management. - Confiscated property in 1999.	- Long-lasting relations with local third parties and the public authorities; - Known at the national level as the first example of seized assets from organized crime in Northern Italy
Co-production between public and third sector	*CISS 38*	- Strategic purpose to address the social needs of the territory - It strives for actual co-production among partners of different natures and competences; - It aims to bring co-production tools within its partners; - Has proposed five different thematic working groups within which to apply experimental participatory methods.	- Consortium of 41 small-sized municipalities in the area known as Canavese; - Promotes a collaborative framework between private, third sector and public actors; - Functions as a public entity that fosters local community development in the territory; - Peculiar legal and organizational nature.	- Grounded in n extensive geographical area; - Functions as a catalyt for many smaller organizations.
	Patti di Collaborazione	- The public office takes care of the iter citizens or the public who go to obtain the normative recognition of the shared management of a certain space, often being vacant or neglected where participatory governance mechanisms take over; - It promotes participatory planning and community engagement tools with public and private actors; - It has a dual role of promoting the Urban Commons procedures between the city and the citizens, and of coordinating and ensuring the procedural coherence within the city departments.	- Small administrative unit responsible for coordinating and supporting the Patti di Collaborazione (the Urban Commons agreements); - Established and well-known example of co-management. - Promoted by the city council since 2016 through a formal regulation.	- The spatial dimension is fostered and strengthened by the managed spaces.

the continuous relationship between the city administration and third sector organizations is fostered by a grounded trust; on the other, this established collaboration results in a saturated context where it is hard for new practices to emerge.

Then, this deep-rooted public-private relation does not bring financial stability to the third sector, which remains economically precarious and unstable, always seeking funding. The studied practices sustain themselves economically thanks to a patchwork of resources, coming from both public and private sources; some incomes are stable and fixed or recurrent – as the rent provided free of charge by the city – others are volatile and casual – such as a one-time donation. Another shade of sustaining non-profit activities is to couple these with profit-oriented solutions that make them less dependent on different and hectic funding and provide the practice with a stable income. Some practices produce and sell their own (local) products, while others offer bar or restaurant service, striving to offer prices lower than the average market prices. For instance, the network of *Case di Quartiere* states that in 2021–22, 80% of their total income was not-for-profit (38.5% coming from public resources, 32.6% from the FOB *Compagnia di San Paolo*) (Rete delle Case del Quartiere 2023). This network, established and recognized in Turin and Italy thanks to its long and strong experience, is still combining its daily funding and working on calls and competitive tenders. Also, according to its website, the community hub part of the second cluster (*Via Baltea*) states that in 2023 it received almost 51,000 euros from FOBs and just over half (around 30,000 €) in public funding from the municipality and the region. Therefore, even when these stakeholders have substantial experience and mature competencies, they are recognized and legitimized to act, but rarely obtain stable funding to implement their activities.

Analyzing the different private funding programmes, FOBs appeared to be leading in the area. Their role in local development strategies is increasingly associated with what has been defined as a 'new philanthropy' that combines logics of grant-making with investment mechanisms (Bishop and Green 2009), and their interventions are considered to be self-legitimized by the potential ability to transpose their entrepreneurial success into social initiatives (Arrigoni 2024). Due to budget cuts and fewer public servants, the growing presence of such entities in public policies and the public arena shows the withdrawal or limited role of public authorities in providing services.

The increasing role of FOBs in financing SI practices also enhances the pacified scenario presented. Indeed, the choice to set a threshold for selecting mainly professionalized and structured practices has also been necessary, given the focus on the financial sustainability of practices funded by private and public sources rather than donors, which always require a certain degree of structure.

Regarding the applied methodology, emergent volunteering groups, politicized groups closer to antagonistic movements and dissenting voices, who would refuse or escape a specific established structure, have automatically fallen out of the practices' selection. The same has happened with informal spaces, occupied or self-managed centres that move between legal and illegal domains. These practices have been defined as 'marginalized niches', and they are 'isolated or diverted' by the dominant institutional order (Savini and Bertolini 2019, 840). They are part of the Turin city practices and, in an informal manner, contribute to fostering an agonistic yet democratic city (Algostino 2024; after Mouffe 2005).

6. Conclusions

Focusing on SI, the contingent definition was developed and redefined by selecting and studying the practices. This operational approach allowed a diversified meaning of SI, detailed in a local context with a strong and long-lasting experience between public and private actors: the empirical cases confirm that SI lies in the processes carried out and the relations established. The stories told all have in common the ability to create relations with different actors and the local communities. The city of Turin and its metropolitan area show how SI practices can be rooted and grounded in a long-lasting cooperation scenario with a pacified tendency. Still, it has also been discussed how, once focusing on their ability to apply for funding, these practices ought to become less and less explorative and insurgent in their structure, becoming a response to citizens' needs regarding social and community services, events and spaces. At the same time, selecting and mapping structured, organized practices could also mean they are less innovative. To a certain extent, the SI practices encountered in the research could also be defined as an institutionalized form of social innovation. Following on this, further research could explore the possible forms of SI proposed outside institutional frameworks.

Then, reflecting on the practices' *locus,* the analysis has shown that every local context implies its own peculiarities, not only in the specific features and services of SI practices, but also in the relations among stakeholders. Therefore, context analysis is confirmed as fundamental in analyzing SI practices, highlighting differences and peculiarities. The quest for the financial resources to implement these practices constitutes a problematic issue concerning their legitimation. It has always been since their beginning, but it is still challenging for all the organizations involved.

SI is thus a relational practice that is highly territorialized and contextual: the criteria employed in the research have been made operative, and a proposed analysis of each local civic action has led to a nuanced definition of the term. A grounded network and peculiar attention for the local communities are needed, for SI to be effective, together with an established way to get through institutions. Research has shown how the concept, once made operative, is strongly connected to the process itself and thus needs a specific structure and professionalism, which, sometimes, takes out the possibility for more insurgent or radical practices to fall under the category of SI. In conclusion, SI practices strive to bring a change by working within institutional frameworks, sometimes in partnership with local administrations, sometimes from their own offices and others thanks to hybrid funding.

Notes

1. The FOBs are regulated in Italy as a non-profit subject, private and with the claimed purpose of social utility and the promotion of local economic development. In 2024 in Italy, 85 FOBs were registered and promoted more than 22,000 local projects varying from welfare proposals to cultural and educational solutions, to social innovation practices. Discussion around their political role is increasing due to their hybrid entity. For this article, the main reference is Arrigoni (2024).
2. Torino Social Factory has been promoted by the larger national strategies part of the 'PON metro – Programma Operativo Nazionale Città Metropolitane 2014–2020 co-funded by the European Union with Structural funds of European Investments.

3. Indeed, 2017–2024 corresponds to Profumo's leadership in Compagnia di San Paolo, characterized by a "philantrocapitalistic ethos" (Arrigoni 2024, 217) according to which funding in the social domain had to be coupled with an economic return. 2017 is also the year that the Torino Social Impact Memorandum has been published, promoted by a network of public and private stakeholders – among others Compagnia di San Paolo, the Municipality of Turin, the two major universities of the city and some volunteering associations active in the territory – and that has been defined as a strategy of entrepreneurial development with an high social impact and technological intensity within the metropolitan area of Turin (Alvaro 2017).

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