27 Work integration in prisons

A taxonomy of social cooperatives

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1 Introduction

The French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire would judge the degree of a society's civilization—in terms of its ethical and moral progress—by how that society treated its convicts and their prison conditions. His judgement, which is also relevant today, has to do with how we deal with revenge and repression, with the role we assign to expiation, and with a person's dignity. The necessary question is thus: what kind of institutions should we create for our prison system? With what purpose, and how to make reclusion instrumental to re-socialization?

For decades, the cooperative movement has been addressing these fundamental questions, based on its core values of democratic participation and workers' emancipation, to propose work integration and training to one of the most marginalized categories of our societies, embedded in an extremely constraining context. These cooperatives seek to strike a balance between economic sustainability and the promotion of human dignity, guaranteeing the right to work, and contributing to the effective development of the prison system as a rehabilitative rather than repressive institution.

Although undeniably relevant, cooperatives operating in prisons remain an under-researched topic, with a predominance of research focusing mainly on specific case studies, resulting in a need for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

In this chapter, we look at the challenges faced by 28 cooperatives operating in the Italian prison system. We first created a dataset of all the main cooperatives currently operating within Italian prisons, utilizing information primarily sourced from the official website and documents of the Italian Ministry of Justice. This data served as the foundation for systematically categorizing these projects into a taxonomy that highlights their distinct - but interwoven - social and economic processes (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Mongelli et al., 2017). We identified differences in task-job creativity and approaches to work integration, eliciting 4 typologies of cooperatives working in prison. We then set about conducting interviews ($N = 10$) to explore how each subtype relates to different aspects such as relationships with and impacts on beneficiaries, resource availability, and so on.

Our collection of cases is relevant for several reasons. Studying cooperatives in the extreme context of the prison system, characterized by disempowered beneficiaries,

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limitations to organizational operations and an extremely bureaucratic approach to problems, offers theoretical reflections for cooperatives operating in resource-constrained settings. Moreover, our mapping contributes to building on good practices to scale up impact and replicate positive experiences, illustrating how the Italian case study could inform similar efforts elsewhere, both in the global north and south. Finally, the chapter sheds light on the work of organizations capable of going beyond the prison experience, linking their beneficiaries to the outside world, providing them with new agency, and empowering them. In doing so, it supports a perspective on social cooperatives that looks beyond prisons conceived as reclusive systems and points to spreading more open and rehabilitation-oriented approaches.

2 A brief contextualization of cooperative economics in the evolving role of prisons

Understanding the potential of cooperatives in contexts of marginality, such as prisons, and evaluating their transformative role towards other forms of possible governance first requires some reflection on their history. The development of the modern prison has its roots in the 18th century, when a new sensitivity to prison conditions emerged. Marking a turning point were, among others, the enquiries of John Howard (1777), who denounced the inhumane conditions of English prisons, as well as the contributions of the Quakers, whose opposition to capital punishment and attention to prisoners' conditions were well established in the writings of founder George Fox, who was outraged by prison promiscuity and by the hanging of girls accused of theft. It was, however, between 1809 and 1823 that Quakers took a leading role in the evolution of English prison policies, especially through the founding in 1809 of the *Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge upon the Punishment of Death and the Improvement of Prison Discipline* by William Allen and Basil Montagu. This association actively engaged in prison reform and the overcoming of corporal and capital punishment. The society's initiatives, inspired in part by the achievements of the *Philadelphia Society*, helped promote a reformative view of punishment, as opposed to a purely punitive approach (Cooper, 1979). This reformative perspective found implementation in various models: on the one hand, the *Pennsylvania system*, which favoured individual solitary confinement as a means of personal reflection; on the other, the *Auburn system*, where inmates worked together in silence and were separated only at night (Blomberg, 2017). In his work, *Surveiller et punir*, Michel Foucault (1975) highlighted how the prison had become one of the main tools of social disciplining in the modern age, acting not only as a place of segregation but also as a context suited to shape and re-educate prisoners.

It is within this historical framework, marked also by reformist instances, that we find projects of cooperative economics in prisons, which have been gradually taking hold. Cooperative economics is not a recent phenomenon: as early as the first half of the 20th century, Emelianoff (1948) described its potential, while current literature emphasizes its potential to promote collective and democratic governance (Altman, 2017; Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014). In sectors as diverse as agriculture and financial services, cooperative models have proven effective in

combining efficiency with values such as social justice and sustainability (Périlleux & Nyssens, 2017). Employed in prison settings, such approaches can strengthen the sense of community and empowerment of incarcerated people, helping to reduce recidivism and inequality (Ben-Ner & Ellman, 2013).

Integrated with the vision of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), which aims at social goals and democratic relations among different stakeholders (Laville, 2015; Utting et al., 2014; Warren, 2024; Borzaga et al., 2019), cooperative economics can thus become a concrete tool for re-education, occupational rehabilitation, and inclusion. A closer look at the historical evolution of the prison institution, as well as Foucault's theoretical reflection, helps to understand how and why such practices also find fertile ground in contexts of restriction of personal freedom, helping to give substance to the idea of a punishment that is not only restriction but also an opportunity for individual and collective redemption.

In Italy, the cooperative economics and the SSE framework have been conformed in the so- called "Terzo Settore" (Third Sector), which groups all private entities that pursue civic, solidaristic and socially relevant purposes and that promote and carry out activities of general interest and public utility, assisting social concerns to complement and support the public sector. Included in this set are social cooperatives, a particular form of cooperative introduced and regulated in Italy by Law 381/1991 and Decree 112/2017 as a social firm, aimed at pursuing the general interest of the community in human promotion and social integration of citizens. Social cooperatives are the firms that best fit into the SSE framework, being characterized by the mission of responding to social needs while promoting economic sustainability (Borzaga & Fazzi, 2014; Campopiano & Bassani, 2021; Candemir et al., 2021). As Chapter 3 by Jerome Warren and Alessandro Narduzzo argues, social—and later community—cooperatives in Italy can be viewed via a lens of institutional innovation. They can be treated as multi-stakeholder cooperatives, as they integrate different categories of stakeholders (e.g., workers, users, volunteers) into their governance, ensuring more democratic decision-making and broader participation (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017; Lund & Novkovic, 2023).

In the Italian context, social cooperatives can be distinguished into two types: (i) those aimed at carrying out social, social-health, and educational services, vocational education and training, extracurricular training, and job placement (type A); and (ii) those that carry out different activities - agricultural, industrial, commercial, or other services - aimed at job placement of disadvantaged people (type B). Type B cooperatives, which in some cases are active even within prisons to foster detainees' work integration, are of particular interest in this chapter and share a structural similarity with analogous social firms in Europe, known as WISEs (Work Integration Social Enterprises). Indeed, in many European countries, WISEs can take different legal forms (not only cooperatives), such as associations, foundations or joint stock companies with a social mission (Spear & amp; Bidet, 2005). Type B social cooperatives, as well as WISEs, thus pursue a dual purpose: (i) to provide employment opportunities for socially and/or economically disadvantaged people; (ii) to generate income and maintain economic sustainability by operating as product or service firms in traditional sectors.

3 Research focus: social cooperatives creating jobs in prisons

Social cooperatives are also active in jails, where they contribute to the reintegration of prisoners into society. This case-based research chapter focuses on social cooperatives that use work as rehabilitation and empowering means. In this section, before discussing the cases, we sketch an overview of how they came into existence, what these cooperatives do in Italy and why their work is important and beneficial for the prisoners and the evolution of the penal institutions.

The emergence of social cooperatives in Italy began in the mid-1960s as part of a wider movement to combat social exclusion and promote economic solidarity. A key milestone in this timeline was Franco Basaglia's radical reforms in mental health care (Warren, 2024), which challenged the institutionalization of mental illness and led to the abolition of Italian asylums (the so-called "Legge Basaglia"—Law 180, 1978). His approach, which emphasized community-based care, led to the creation of the *Cooperativa Sociale Lavoratori Uniti* by Basaglia in Trieste in 1972. Believed to be the world's first social cooperative, it was set up to provide meaningful employment opportunities for psychiatric patients, helping them to reintegrate into society and achieve economic independence (Bennett, 1985).

In the 1980s, the cooperative model counted about 600 cooperatives (Warren, 2024; Borzaga & Failoni, 1990) and started to extend to the prison system, marking a significant shift in society's approach to rehabilitation and reintegration. The first prison-based cooperative, "*Cooperativa 29 Giugno*", founded in Rome's Rebibbia prison in 1985, was set up by inmates to provide structured work opportunities to improve their economic, social and professional conditions.[1]

This development was part of a wider historical trend in Italy, where cooperatives became tools to address systemic failures in traditional institutions such as asylums and prisons, providing an alternative to the dehumanizing and punitive structures of asylums and prisons, pushing in the direction of rehabilitation, social integration, and economic empowerment.

Work opportunities in prisons facilitated by social cooperatives unlock potential, foster meaningful creation, and provide inmates with a source of income (Bernardi & Venturoli, 2018). These initiatives prioritize empowerment, helping inmates build self-confidence, develop a sense of responsibility, and regain agency. Beyond imparting valuable work experience and discipline, such programmes prepare individuals for smoother reintegration into society, often placing them in a more advantageous position compared to those without prior work or education (Kalica, 2014). Through regular work and income, social cooperative projects enable inmates to undergo a transformative process, reshaping their identities. As Mongelli et al. (2018) highlight, this shift allows inmates to be seen—and to see themselves—not merely as criminals, but as "regular people" and, more importantly, as "workers". This redefined identity is pivotal for successful reintegration, offering a sense of purpose and agency to rebuild their lives. By laying a foundation for post-release stability, these initiatives not only reduced recidivism rates but also alleviated broader societal costs, demonstrating the profound impact of cooperative-led prison work programmes. Through job-related experiences,

cooperatives operating in jail may also have a potential catalyst role for transformation of the prison system in more participatory terms, fostering inmates' sense of responsibility over their collective experience (Gonza et al., 2024; Ellerman & Gonza, 2024).

Data from Antigone (2017), an Italian non-profit organization focused on reforming the prison system, underscores the rehabilitative benefits of prison work. Work not only provides constructive activity, but it also greatly reduces recidivism rates. Among the 18,654 inmates participating in jail work within the Italian prison system, the recidivism rate is notably low at 2%. This contrasts sharply with the national recidivism average of 68.7% among the broader prison population of 56,107 inmates (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2023).

A powerful success story is that of *Made in Carcere*, a social cooperative dedicated to improving the lives of incarcerated women by offering them a "second chance". This cooperative involves inmates in the production and packaging of fashion products, treating them as regular employees with a standard salary. When inmates enter the *Made in Carcere* laboratory, no one asks them what the committed crime was. There, they become workers, with responsibilities and agency, far from the crime they are identified with for the rest of the day. Through this experience, inmates begin to recognize their value, expanding their range of choices and enabling them to experience self-determination. Thus, through work, not only do inmates learn new skills, but they also increase their level of empowerment, nurturing a sense of agency, dignity and personal growth (Mongelli et al., 2018).

3.1 Research setting: the Italian prisons system

In Italy, working in prison was formally recognized as a tool for rehabilitation and social reintegration on 26 July 1975 (Italian Law N. 354), which transformed working in prison from punitive to supportive, fostering reintegration of convicts into society (Italian Law No. 354 of 26 July 1975, art. 1). Indeed, working in prison is now intended to promote the re-education of offenders with a view to their reintegration into society (Italian Law N. 354 of 26 July 1975, art. 1).

In Italy, prisoners can be employed either by the prison administration or by external employers. The primary difference between the two employment types lies in compensation. When employed by the prison administration, prisoners receive two-thirds of the remuneration established by the CCNL (National Collective Labour Agreement) for equivalent work levels (Cavotta & Rosini, 2021). The prison administration offers employment in domestic, industrial, and agricultural sectors. In domestic roles, prisoners handle tasks essential for the prison's daily operations. Industrial roles involve producing items such as clothing and furniture for public institutions. Agricultural roles include working on prison-owned lands and the like, with activities that encompass specialized tasks such as beekeeping and milking (Ministry of Justice).

To encourage external organizations to engage with prison employment and enhance the competitiveness and productivity of jail-based organizations, the Italian Parliament enacted Law N. 193/2000, widely known as the "*Legge Smuraglia*".

This law grants financial benefits to organizations that employ prisoners and promotes social cooperatives working in prisons as contexts (Furfaro, 2008). By broadening the definition of "disadvantaged people" to include prisoners, this law strategically positions social cooperatives—dedicated to human development and social inclusion—as rehabilitative instruments within the prison system.

The *Legge Smuraglia* was, however, one step forward in a system that is walking backward. The Italian prison system has proved several times its failures in rehabilitating inmates, applying an outdated view that prioritizes punishment over reintegration. The Italian prisons remain repressive rather than rehabilitative, and control and surveillance of inmates often take precedence over agency creation and opportunity development (Mongelli et al., 2018). In contrast, exemplary prison systems (e.g., Norway, the Netherlands, etc.) prioritize rehabilitation through education, skill-building, and psychological support aimed at reducing recidivism via social reintegration. These systems demonstrate that a supportive environment, where inmates can imagine and act for a change in their lives, can more effectively prepare them for acquiring productive societal roles, highlighting, even more, the gap of the Italian approach, where reintegration efforts remain underfunded and undervalued (Pratt & Eriksson, 2013).

4 Data and methods

Addressing the lack of a comprehensive overview of social cooperatives working in prisons, our empirical effort is dedicated to developing a taxonomy to clarify the emerging and possibly different forms and functions of social cooperatives within the prison system, understanding whether (and eventually how) they differ in their goals, organizational practices and impact on prisoners.

4.1 Case selection and data collection

To realize the taxonomy, we mixed two different data sources. On the one hand, we relied on the information provided by websites that work as online shops and advertisers for jail-based production projects (e.g., the website of the Italian Ministry of Justice, that of "Economia Carceraria"/"Jail Economy" and of "FreedHome"). On the other hand, we accessed the list of government-supported initiatives present on the Ministry of Justice website, which we used as a proxy for relevance, sorting the list by the size of funding received. We pooled the two data sources together to make sure we got the most relevant, active and visible organizations. We initially selected 47 projects implemented by 33 organizations, including cooperatives, social enterprises or associations. As this research focuses on cooperatives, we excluded from the initial pool any organization that was not identified as a cooperative. Our final sample included 28 different projects implemented by 28 different social cooperatives.

Most of the projects in the dataset involve between 10 and 15 prisoners, and some initiatives have more than 30 years of experience. Activities range from the growth and sale of plants to the production and sale of food products, from packaging workshops to the production of handicrafts. Table 27.1 breaks down our sample into the 3 main categories of activities developed by the social cooperatives.

Table 27.1 Sample breakdown of social cooperatives' work-integration activities

Type of Work-Integration Activities	#	%
Production and sale of baked goods and confectionery	14	50
Agriculture and processing of agricultural products	4	14
Crafts and material processing	10	35

In the food sector, a Sicilian cooperative, active since 2005, produces and sells typical local products such as dried fruits, herbs, spices and preserves, and employs between 8 and 12 inmates. Another cooperative, located in the province of Bergamo, started a bakery in 2013, permanently employing between 5 and 6 inmates.

In the handicraft sector, some cooperatives focus on the production of canvas bags and tailoring items, providing inmates with the opportunity to learn practical skills. Another handicraft initiative is the carpentry workshop, active since 2016, which allows inmates to acquire specific skills in woodwork.

As a further step, we collected detailed information on each of the cooperatives and the projects carried out through online searches, including the examination of relevant websites, articles and social reports. This approach allowed the development of a comprehensive database, including details such as the prison in which the project is carried out, the year in which the project started, the main activity carried out and the prison population targeted by the project.

5 A taxonomy of social cooperatives working in prisons

As a first step, we undertook a collective iterative exploratory analysis by having four researchers read together the social and economic processes for each of the selected projects to capture and interpret emerging differences from the project descriptions reported in the database. Two main intuitions emerged from this collective brainstorming phase: some economic processes are more creative than others (*low* vs. *high creativity*), and social processes differ in the role given to training (*on-the-job* vs. *formal training*). Once the categories and their sub-dimensions were identified, three researchers independently labelled the economic and social processes of each project, then debated the difference in their classifications to converge on a commonly agreed set of labels. We now describe these findings in further detail.

Creativity can be defined as the additional stimulus employees receive from having control over their work and especially their ideas (Sun et al., 2012). This concept goes beyond the mere execution of tasks to emphasize a more engaged and thoughtful participation in the work process. Fostering creativity of this kind in a disempowered context such as jails allows us to "convert organizations into learning spaces" (Vieta et al., 2024), generating opportunities for rehabilitation, making inmates acquire higher self-confidence, agency and more useful skills to be leveraged once outside, with a net positive impact for the whole community (see also the "spillover effect" in Vieta et al., 2024). However, it also carries some difficult challenges in the ways such

creativity can produce value that is then brought to the market. Thus, we used high or low content of creativity embedded in the work activities run by the social cooperative with inmates as the main criteria for classifying the economic processes of social cooperatives. One example of an economic process that could be considered highly creative is the production of handicraft bags. In these cases, each piece is unique and carries with it a piece of the life of the person who made it, for individual expression is intimately linked to the identity of its creator. Conversely, an example of an economic process with a minimal creative component is the engagement of inmates in agricultural work. This is because agricultural tasks are characterized by routinization and structure, with an emphasis on physical labour and adherence to established processes for planting, harvesting and maintenance. The focus is on manual skill and efficiency, rather than creative decision-making or individual input, as opposed to more creative tasks such as designing or making unique products.

As far as the social process implemented by prison-based social cooperatives is concerned, we observed that all cooperatives run activities aimed at reintegrating inmates into society by equipping them with work-related skills, typically through specialized courses and training. At the same time, our analysis reveals distinct variations in the balance between on-the-job and formal training among these initiatives. In some projects, on-the-job training predominates, especially when the emphasis lies on fostering economic self-sufficiency by directly supporting labour market integration. Conversely, in other projects, employment activities serve more as an extension of primary training efforts, where structured training sessions—whether preceding or accompanying employment—form an integral part of the rehabilitation pathway.

From these distinctions, we categorized projects as either primarily focused on work integration or education. This analytical approach aligns with recent literature on social cooperatives, such as the framework by Marocchi (2023), which differentiates between "mainly productive" and "mainly formative" work integration social enterprises.

For instance, projects centred on immediate labour market entry might involve inmates in practical work tasks, such as bakery production, encouraging learning through direct experience. In contrast, projects emphasizing preparatory workshops on life skills, vocational training, or personal development highlight the training component as fundamental to the reintegration process.

This taxonomy categorizes prison-based social cooperatives along two main dimensions: the degree of creativity involved in their economic activities and the focus on either on-the-job or formal training in delivering work-related skills to inmates (Table 27.2).

As shown in Table 27.2, the category "predominantly on-the-job training with low creativity content" emerged as the most common in our sample, encompassing a total of 15 social cooperatives. This prevalence underscores a strong focus on practical skill acquisition within these cooperatives. Conversely, the category "predominantly formal training with high creativity content", represented by only 3 social cooperatives, stands out as the least common typology in our dataset.

In the second phase of our research process, we conducted interviews ($N = 10$) with representatives from various social cooperatives. Given the higher frequency

Table 27.2 A taxonomy of social cooperatives working in prisons along social and economic processes (numbers represent the frequency for each quadrant).

	Predominantly on-the-Job Training	*Predominantly Formal Training*
Low content of creativity	15	5
High content of creativity	5	3

Table 27.3 Number of interviews per typology and social cooperatives' main activities

Typology	*#Interviews*	*Interviewed Social Cooperatives' Main Activities*
high creativity content - focus on on-the-job training	2	production of accessories (1); creation of printed t-shirts (1);
high creativity content - focus on formal training	2	ceramics manufacturing (1); manufacture of apparel (1);
low creativity content - focus on on-the-job training	4	production of food products (3); production of beer (1);
low creativity content - focus on formal training	2	cultivation and sale of plants (1); production of gowns (1);

of *low creativity content - focus on on-the-job training.* In this case, we conducted interviews with four social cooperatives in this category. For each of the remaining categories, we interviewed two cooperatives, allowing for a balanced exploration of both dominant and less frequent typologies. Table 27.3 displays a breakdown of interviews for each typology identified with a summary description of the main activities developed by each social cooperative interviewed.

The interviews were semi-structured, audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The duration of each interview was up to 40 minutes. Our main goal was to uncover how social cooperatives work and what impact mechanisms they activate on prisoners. More specifically, we tried to gain in-depth insight into the challenges that social cooperatives face in implementing their projects, the procedures applied to involve prisoners and how the benefits, both material and immaterial, influence prisoners' identity and sense of agency when they participate in the projects.

6 Social Cooperatives working in prison: common characteristics and challenges

In this section, we discuss findings that emerged as common to all the 10 social cooperatives interviewed. Specifically, we discuss the challenges stemming from their operational context, notably the complicated relationship with prison staff, as well as the positive but still small-scale impact they create in the prison system.

A first shared challenge emerged, concerning the complex relationship social cooperatives have with prison staff, particularly at lower hierarchical levels.

Interviews reveal a prevailing sense of resistance among these staff members toward work integration initiatives (similar or other experiences; see for example, Bennett, 1985; Foot, 2014). This resistance seems rooted in the fact that such initiatives for inmates introduce changes and add responsibilities beyond what the prison staff is traditionally brought to think. As a consequence, lower-level officers, who primarily focus on enforcing confinement and maintaining order, maintain the same approach when re-education activities led by social cooperatives are in place.

These resistances seem particularly pronounced among lower-level staff than among prison directors, with whom it is easier to foster a collaborative environment, especially when they recognize and share the positive effect of working integration activities.

Obstacles like restrictions on daily activities for security reasons, extensive bureaucratic procedures, and limitations of autonomy also emerged as considerably hindering the effectiveness of reintegration projects.

These findings come as no surprise, as previous empirical research already highlighted the repressive mindset of prison staff and their hindering role in blocking prisoners from exercising their agency (Mongelli et al., 2018). This generates difficulties in evolving identities and roles, as observed in other relatable fields (Foot, 2014, Bennet, 1985, see also the discussion on the role of hierarchies and structures in Biggiero, 2024).

Another key challenge revealed by the interviews is that work-integration activities are usually accessible to only a selected group of prisoners. Participation requires inmates to undergo a selection process governed by specific criteria set by the prison administration. For instance, selection may depend on an inmate's legal status, performance in job interviews where they present their CV, or behaviour during incarceration. This selective access risks creating exclusion and inequalities, highlighting that such opportunities are not yet a right for all prisoners. This implies that the reach of these initiatives remains restricted to relatively few individuals.

As for the benefits, interviewees emphasized that the most significant positive changes observed occur when prisoners transition from the confinement of jail to the workplace. This shift marks a turning point for prisoners' psychological well-being. In prison, inmates often endure isolation, monotony, and lack of stimuli, while the workplace reintroduces opportunities for meaningful interaction with fellow inmates or external parties, such as customers or suppliers.

Social cooperatives commonly facilitate these social interactions, aiming to nurture teamwork and relationships that promote a sense of belonging. This emphasis on connection supports inmates' personal, social, and psychological development.

Connected to the previous point, a defining feature of social cooperatives is their role in helping prisoners construct a new identity. Working in a cooperative setting allows inmates to acquire the role of "workers", which distances them from the confining role of "prisoners". Unlike the repressive mindset typical of the prison context—where inmates are primarily identified with their crimes—social cooperative projects enable a gradual shift toward a different, more generative identity (Rogers et al., 2017, and Foot, 2014).

The link between the inner identity of the prisoner and that of the worker, which bridges with similar workers outside the prison; the need to act to providing agency to inmates in an environment where the prison staff adopts a limiting, punitive cultural perspective; and the impossibility to easily overcoming bureaucratic and administrative burdens in an environment that often doesn't understand and welcome their efforts are all examples of the bars social cooperatives shake and try to break within jails.

This requires huge levels of problem-solving and the ability to balance compromise but also push forward when needed. However, social cooperatives can thrive when there are supportive conditions enabled by prison directors, who can act on staff, bureaucracy and the space given to cooperatives to foster their activities. This alliance—often developed on a personal level—is what makes social cooperatives' work possible in jails, contrasting the limitations put in place by the prison system itself.

In the following sections, we will explore the specific typologies of social cooperatives, examining the mechanisms leading to impact and the primary challenges they encounter, as summarized in Table 27.4.

6.1 High creativity content and on-the-job training prevalence

In this section, we examine the distinctive features of social cooperatives that implement work-integration activities with high levels of creativity in their economic processes and emphasize on-the-job training (OTJT) over formal education as part of their social mission. From our taxonomy of social cooperatives working in jail, 5 cases pertain to this typology.

High-creativity OTJT projects involve the production of handcrafted items, such as tailoring bags from repurposed materials and creatively screen-printing fair-trade t-shirts. Inmates engage in the entire production process, transforming raw materials into finished retail products. In these projects, work activities and training seamlessly align as workers are directly "inserted" into the job.

Table 27.4 Summary of impact mechanisms and main challenges per typology of jail-based social cooperatives

Typology	*Impact Mechanisms*	*Main Challenges*
high creativity content - focus on on-the-job training	Immediate economic reward Focus on personal expression.	Balance inmates' sense of autonomy with structured work-related tasks.
high creativity content - focus on formal training	Higher focus on personal expression and self-development	Stricter access criteria and limited impact
low creativity content- focus on on-the-job training	Larger scale of convicts involved Immediate economic reward Partnerships with external actors	Balancing scale with surveillance Limited material and financial resources
low creativity content - focus on formal training	Convicts' continuous training Convicts' direct relationship with customers	Additional costs for increasing trained staff

Social cooperatives implementing high-creativity OTJT projects prioritize hands-on learning, integrating inmates directly into work activities, where working itself becomes the central rehabilitative tool. Convicts generally have considerable freedom in organizing and managing their work, a necessity in creative production processes. For example, inmates involved in crafting bags participate in every stage of production and have the freedom to express themselves creatively through their work. With a high degree of creativity in their activities, prisoners are not confined to rigid, predefined tasks; instead, they can leverage their creative skills to devise innovative solutions to challenges and make decisions on how to tackle various issues. This freedom not only makes room for creativity but also fosters the development of problem-solving skills and enhances their engagement in the work process.

Additionally, these high-creativity OTJT cooperatives place a strong emphasis on immediate economic rewards. From the start, prisoners receive a salary, with full autonomy in the decisions on how to spend it. This personal control enhances their sense of independence and financial responsibility. In both the 2 interviews we ran, it emerged that inmates—particularly women—use their earnings to support their families. Contributing financially helps strengthen emotional bonds and provides inmates with a renewed sense of purpose, essential for their reintegration. Furthermore, this financial support can alleviate the fear and helplessness often experienced in prison, encouraging a more positive outlook.

6.2 High creativity content and formal training prevalence

This category is the least frequent in our sample, as only 3 out of 28 projects combine highly creative working activities with formal training (FT). Different from the previous typology, high-creativity FT social cooperatives offer formal training before and throughout the carrying out of work activities. These projects include the creation of handicrafts such as woodworking workshop accessories, bracelets, and ceramics. Similarly to the previous typology described, inmates exercise their creativity at every stage of the production process. In these initiatives, practical work and training are organized as two distinct or parallel phases, as social cooperatives provide a training period before integrating workers into productive activities.

High-creativity FT social cooperatives view work placement not merely as an end in itself but as a catalyst for meaningful changes in prisoners' attitudes and behaviours. While this perspective is likely applicable to all work integration projects, this particular typology places greater emphasis on transformative personal development rather than solely on immediate economic benefits and direct work integration.

These projects tend to be more resource-intensive and require greater effort because training is not merely a byproduct of work (through learning by doing or learning from and with colleagues); it involves additional investments and specialized expertise. This configuration of cooperatives adopts a long-term approach, aiming to equip inmates with a skill set they can leverage for future opportunities and pursue autonomously after their release from prison.

Aligned with this perspective, our interviews revealed that entry into these initiatives may be more challenging for convicts compared to other cooperative models. Participation requires not only a willingness to engage but also a proactive and open attitude toward learning. Consequently, the selected prisoners are not solely focused on financial rewards; instead, they are motivated to achieve outcomes that enhance their self-esteem and help them recognize that they have access to transformative opportunities that can change their lives.

This approach seems key, especially considering that most prisoners in Italy are relatively young and thus deprived of valuable learning opportunities that could facilitate their reintegration into society (Mongelli et al., 2018).

6.3 Low creativity content and on-the-job training prevalence

According to our classification, this is the most common type of social cooperative operating in prisons, accounting for 15 out of 28 cases.

Low-creativity OTJT projects focus on generally less creative productions, such as food, with an emphasis on. Examples include patisserie workshops, bakery preparation and fruit and vegetable processing for preserves. Prisoners are involved only in the actual production phase, transforming raw materials into finished products ready for sale, without being involved in the design or ideation of the products.

Work and training are closely intertwined in these initiatives, with workers integrated into their roles from scratch. Productive tasks in this category require less creativity compared to the other typologies discussed, as they prioritize efficiency and standardized work performance.

While routinized tasks may limit creative expression, they allow social cooperatives to ensure broader accessibility for inmates. The four interviews support this observation, indicating that the entry criteria for their initiatives are less stringent, leading to higher participation and enabling low-creativity OTJT projects to operate on a larger scale. However, interviewees emphasize that involving a greater number of prisoners necessitates increased supervision and control, which has several implications. Enhanced surveillance restricts the flexibility of work activities and diminishes inmates' autonomy, creating a more rigid environment. Additionally, strict oversight impacts the availability of material resources, as security measures complicate and slow down the procurement and distribution of supplies essential for large-scale production.

One interviewee noted that the increased security and surveillance associated with large-scale prisoner participation presents challenges in securing material resources, such as bakery equipment or space for laboratory operations. To address these challenges, social cooperatives frequently seek financial support from external for-profit organizations or establish partnerships.

6.4 Low content of creativity and prevalent formal training

Low-creativity FT projects include services such as paper craft workshops, catering services and gown-making. Inmates focus on learning new skills needed for their

jobs. In the catering service, for example, they learn how to interact effectively with customers to ensure a positive customer experience. In these projects, work activities and training are structured as separate components, with formal training preparing inmates for specific skills.

Low-creativity FT social cooperatives focus on structured productive tasks but differ in their emphasis on formal training and the acquisition of skills before starting work, although the tasks are not particularly creative and dynamic. Production here remains stable, with no variation in design, requiring precision and adherence to pre-defined standards rather than personal expression. A good example of this is the initiative where inmates produce judicial gowns, where creativity is minimal because the product must meet specific, unchanging requirements.

Formal training requires inmates to have a proactive attitude and willingness to make a great effort to acquire or improve specific skills related to the core activities of the projects. On the social cooperative side, increasing the level of formal training also means expanding the size of trained staff, with the associated costs. However, unlike the *predominantly on-the-job training and low creativity content* category, where increased supervision of prisoners' work activities is often necessary, this category relies on formal training to enable prisoners to carry out their tasks autonomously. The formal training thus sets the foundation and ensures that prisoners can carry out their tasks responsibly, reducing the need for constant supervision.

7 Discussion and conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to provide a first understanding of how social cooperatives operate in prisons, revealing both the contextual challenges stemming from limited resources and the pervasive disempowerment of individuals within the system, and their potential as catalysts for rehabilitation and societal reintegration.

These organizations, rooted in cooperative economics and the broader Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), offer a compelling alternative to purely punitive mode,ls of incarceration.

Our analysis, based on a unique dataset including 28 case studies has provided a thorough examination of the landscape of jail-based social cooperatives, identifying common traits and challenges and emphasizing diverse intervention models.

Jail-based social cooperatives share a common goal: to foster social integration by alleviating the constraints imposed by incarceration. They do so by implementing strategies that promote identity creation and agency acquisition among inmates, ultimately empowering them. This empowerment is crucial, as it fosters awareness among prisoners that a new life is possible also for them.

As such, the impact of social cooperatives in prisons extends beyond their immediate beneficiaries, through their families and future co-workers (once freed), with a spillover effect in the broader community (Vieta et al., 2024).

Firstly, the successful reintegration of former inmates into society reduces recidivism rates, leading to safer communities and lower costs for the criminal justice system. Social cooperatives contribute to this process by providing ex-offenders

with valuable work experience, skills, and social support networks, increasing their chances of securing employment and leading productive lives.

Secondly, the presence of social cooperatives within prisons can challenge negative stereotypes and promote a more nuanced understanding of incarcerated individuals. By showcasing the potential for rehabilitation and the capacity for prisoners to contribute to society, these organizations can help to break down barriers and foster greater social inclusion.

Finally, the success of social cooperatives in prisons can inspire similar initiatives in other marginalized communities, demonstrating the power of cooperative models to address social and economic challenges. The Italian experience, as highlighted in this chapter, offers valuable lessons for other countries seeking to improve their prison systems and promote the rehabilitation of offenders,

By providing prisoners with opportunities for meaningful work, skill-building, and democratic participation, social cooperatives act as catalysts for more participatory governance. They empower inmates to take control of their lives, fostering a sense of agency and responsibility that is often absent within the confines of the prison system. This empowerment extends beyond the individual level, as cooperative structures encourage collective decision-making and shared ownership, promoting a sense of community and mutual support. The historical emphasis on democratic participation within cooperative economics, as highlighted by Emelianoff (1948) and more recent scholars (Altman, 2017; Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014), underscores the potential of these organizations to cultivate participatory skills that can be transferred to life beyond prison walls.

Despite the selective access to work-integration activities, the cooperatives significantly enhance inmates' psychological well-being and facilitate identity transformation from "prisoner" to "worker". By promoting meaningful social interactions and a sense of belonging, they empower inmates to reclaim their humanity and develop essential skills for reintegration. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to a more inclusive approach to rehabilitation within the prison system.

However, as our qualitative analysis highlights, jail-based social cooperatives navigate a challenging landscape marked by bureaucratic hurdles and contextual resistance from lower-level prison staff. Their success relies on effective problem-solving and the ability to foster collaboration with supportive prison directors.

By categorizing jail-based social cooperatives according to their objectives and operational contexts, we established a reference taxonomy aimed at enhancing our understanding of these organizations within the challenging environment of prisons. This framework serves not only to advance academic discourse but also to guide future research into the various profiles of social cooperatives that may emerge in prison settings.

The taxonomy delineated four distinct types of social cooperatives based on their approaches to creativity and training:

High Creativity with On-the-Job Training (High-creativity OTJT): by integrating creative activities with practical training, these cooperatives facilitate the development of professional skills while promoting autonomy and responsibility among inmates. This dual approach addresses both economic incentives and psychological needs essential for successful reintegration.

High Creativity with Formal Training (High-creativity FT): These cooperatives emphasize empowerment through creativity and structured learning, fostering intrapersonal growth such as self-awareness and self-esteem.

Low Creativity with On-the-Job Training (Low-creativity OTJT): cooperatives in this category focus on enhancing inmates' material conditions by providing immediate access to work opportunities. This model not only offers economic rewards but also reinforces prisoners' roles as active agents in their rehabilitation, thereby enhancing their financial autonomy and social identity.

Low Creativity with Formal Training (Low-creativity FT): this model emphasizes skill acquisition through structured training programmes, fostering a proactive attitude among inmates. Although less creative, this approach is well suited to transferring marketable skills to inmates and enhances their self-sufficiency, ultimately boosting their confidence and easing their transition back into society.

Each model tends to address unique aspects of inmate rehabilitation, from fostering self-esteem to enhancing economic independence. By understanding these differences, we not only appreciate the significant contributions of social cooperatives in the Italian prison system but also lay the groundwork for future research and practical applications that align with perspectives that go beyond the prison as a repressive system and see rehabilitation as a social, work-based process. In conclusion, social cooperatives operating in Italian prisons represent a promising approach to rehabilitation and societal reintegration. By fostering participatory governance, promoting skill-building, and generating positive spillover effects, these organizations offer a compelling alternative to traditional, purely punitive models of incarceration. Further research is needed to fully understand the long-term impact of social cooperatives on recidivism rates, social inclusion, and community development. However, these organizations have the potential to play a significant role in creating a more just and equitable society.

Ultimately, these insights pave the way for exploring how social cooperatives can serve as part of a broader strategy to reimagine and transform the incarceration system itself toward more effective reintegration.

Note

1 Franco Basaglia's pioneering work in Italy, particularly his efforts to dismantle psychiatric institutions and promote community-based care, significantly influenced abolitionist movements. a. His approach to deinstitutionalization and emphasis on human rights resonated with activists throughout the world seeking to reform or abolish carceral systems. Basaglia's methods demonstrated the possibility of replacing oppressive institutions with community-centred alternatives, inspiring similar strategies within abolitionist circles (Foot, 2014).

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