

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Collaborative governance against organised crime: fighting caporalato ‘from below’

Isabella Clough Marinaro 

Department of Psychological and Social Sciences, John Cabot University, Rome, Italy
Email: iclough@johncabot.edu

(Received 10 April 2025; revised 4 October 2025; accepted 9 March 2026)

Abstract

Italy’s dynamics of labour exploitation in agriculture have recently attracted intense scrutiny, nationally and internationally. Legislative reform and multiple policy initiatives have been introduced since 2016 to address some of the factors driving exploitation within and beyond traditional mafia areas. While much scholarship has examined the effectiveness of legislation and enforcement, little attention has been paid to the policies’ more innovative dimensions. Indeed, recognising that repression is not enough to deter criminal exploitation of workers, Italy has devised a model of governance-with-civil-society, seeking to mobilise and empower grassroots actors to tackle the causes of these crimes. This article assesses whether this collaborative governance approach is proving able to achieve its goals. It draws on grey literature and semi-structured interviews with civil society actors tasked with fighting exploitation from ‘below’: unionists, activists, NGOs, independent observers, and alternative food producers. Borrowing from collaborative governance studies, it identifies strengths and weakness, and discusses whether the model offers a viable approach for fighting organised and white-collar crime in Italy beyond traditional ‘anti-mafia’ systems.

Keywords: caporalato; labour exploitation; collaborative governance; civil society; mafia; agriculture

Introduction

The term *caporalato* refers to the illegal recruitment and hiring of workers in Italy, especially for seasonal agricultural labour, with roots going back centuries. Despite often being presented as a clearcut set of practices, concentrated in the South and mafia-intensive areas, its manifestations vary across time and space, responding to contextual social and economic drivers (Perrotta 2014). Today, many of the mechanisms are enacted by white-collar actors operating throughout Italy within the otherwise legal economy. These figures largely have no connection to organised crime networks (Scaturro 2021) and their practices are often hard to define as mafia-type.¹ On the other hand, where mafias control or invest in agriculture, food processing and other vulnerable sectors, exploitative practices contribute to their businesses’ profits and reflect their influence on local employment (Donatiello, Martone, and Moiso 2022; 2024). Caporalato is therefore emblematic of the constantly evolving nature of entrepreneurial crime, manifesting the challenges of distinguishing between mafias, organised and ‘disorganised’ crime in Italy today.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Association for the Study of Modern Italy. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press or the rights holder(s) must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

Responding to social indignation about deadly working conditions in agriculture, but also acknowledging the complexities of labour exploitation, the Italian state has developed a policy that combines its customary focus on repression with novel strategies of prevention and protection. This seeks to tackle the multiple socioeconomic, institutional and structural factors driving and enabling exploitation. The framework brings together public agencies and civil society actors in a collaborative governance system aiming to harness the expertise and reach of grassroots actors. The latter, in fact, are widely recognised as core to Italy's resilience to organised crime (Scaturro 2024). This multi-actor approach aligns with growing international trends in public policy (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002) which recognise that exclusively top-down, state-centric policy design and implementation often fails to reach vulnerable groups or address localised problems.

This governance framework is one of Italy's most complex endeavours to date to tackle such variegated criminal practices. This article explores how far the strategy is proving able to empower civil society actors to counter the dynamics fuelling labour exploitation. It then considers whether the approach could be expanded to other criminal dynamics beyond traditional 'anti-mafia' approaches. The first section discusses the fuzzy connotations of the term *caporalato*, contextualised within scholarly debates on conceptualising contemporary criminal groups and activities. The second section briefly introduces relevant theoretical elements from collaborative governance studies and summarises the methodological approach adopted here. The third outlines the architecture and goals of Italy's collaborative system. The following two sections then draw on institutional materials and fieldwork interviews with key stakeholders to evaluate how far the system is meeting its objectives, identifying its achievements but also its flaws. The conclusion then broadens the analysis to discuss whether the model offers a viable approach for fighting organised and white-collar crime in Italy beyond traditional 'anti-mafia' systems.

Blurred boundaries, fluid crimes

In its narrowest meaning, *caporalato* refers to 'an illegal form of labour intermediation in which the recruiter, a gangmaster called *caporale*, profits by enrolling and mobilising workers according to the short-term demand of employers' (Bagnardi 2024, 320). As Perrotta (2014) has shown, such brokers have operated around Italy since at least the sixteenth century. Despite profound changes in agricultural production and the development of worker organisations over time, informal brokers continue to be essential today in connecting employers and labourers. Indeed, Perrotta and Raeymaekers (2023) highlight the functional role of *caporalato* in contemporary capitalism and trace three interconnected developments since the 1980s that have aggravated the phenomenon: the growing integration of Italy's food production systems into global markets, state retrenchment from welfare and worker protections, and the growth of foreign labour migration. The authors view *caporali* as neoliberal brokers who provide flexible and disposable workers, allowing employers and the state to avoid carrying the costs of reproduction of that labour. While not all exploited labourers are migrants, the lack of legal and social protections that many foreign workers experience makes them particularly exposed (UNHRC 2019; Caruso and Corrado 2021). Thus, contemporary exploitation mechanisms are entangled with Italy's restrictive migration regime and the grave situations of precarity and vulnerability it produces (Palumbo 2024). From this perspective, *caporali* are not the cause but a symptom of larger dynamics of inequality.

Seeing *caporalato* as a corollary of contemporary globalised production systems shifts the focus away from considering it a pathology particular to Italy or to agriculture. Indeed, similar practices occur within food production in other advanced economies (Perrotta 2014; Palumbo, Corrado, and Triandafyllidou 2022; Associazione Terra 2021). Moreover,

caporalato-like relations have proliferated in other Italian sectors, such as construction and food delivery, logistics, ship-construction and the hotel industry (Omizzolo 2021a; Iannuzzi and Sacchetto 2022; Peruzzi and Piro 2024). Each of these sectors operate uniquely, according to their specific labour requirements and value chains. Nevertheless, they are all marked by the structural tendency towards hiring disposable workers, along a spectrum of more or less in/formal contractual agreements (Peruzzi and Piro 2024). Many businesses exploit liberalised subcontracting systems which enable them to outsource hiring to cooperatives and agencies able to hide underpayment and contractual irregularities within layers of opaque bureaucracy (Franciosi 2022), thereby eroding wages and workers' ability to negotiate rights.

In agriculture, these more subtle methods of exploitation, as well as white-collar techniques for avoiding social security contributions (UNHRC 2019), are increasingly being adopted. Yet, here too, exploitative practices vary based on the produce, geographical context and distribution system (Ippolito, Perrotta, and Raeymaekers 2021). Much Italian food production has adopted intensive agri-industrial processes to compete in global markets. Nevertheless, the sector is buyer-driven, dominated by 'international super buying centres – that is, alliances between the largest distribution groups aimed at obtaining better contractual conditions through collective negotiation with suppliers' (Palumbo 2024, 155; see also Caruso and Corrado 2021 and Massari 2023). Having to submit to the low prices demanded by these actors means that producers' profit margins are minimal. In some regions, such as Lazio and Puglia, moreover, growers have predominantly remained small-scale, failing to form consortia that would enable them to withstand the aggressive pricing practices of buyers and transportation firms (Associazione Terra, 2021). The perishability of produce and widespread under-mechanisation requires farmers to operate under intense time pressure, as links in larger 'just-in-time value chains' (Palumbo, Corrado, and Triandafyllidou 2022, 186). A further structural problem concerns the fact that, officially, agricultural wages are set by national collective bargaining agreements and refined at the provincial level to reflect local markets. However, the system incentivises employing workers sporadically, paying for piecework rather than by the hour, and under-declaring the amount worked, while pushing labourers to accept excessively long shifts to maximise earnings (Palumbo 2024). Although anti-exploitation legislation (Law 199/2016, Art. 10) has introduced a process for aligning agricultural wages to other sectors to fight these downward pressures, in practice this is having limited effects, as it cannot address the problem of undeclared work. Without the massive implementation of labour inspections to monitor payments, contractual stipulations are easily bypassed.

The historical, narrow concept of caporalato has thus taken on fuzzier contours as methods of informal recruitment and employment have proliferated under neoliberalism. Indeed, in agriculture, relations between workers, brokers and employers vary widely. Certainly, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) indicators of labour exploitation are often present,² from excessive hours and inadequate wages to cases of child labour, sexual abuse and debt bondage. Nevertheless, reports that depict workers as passive victims ignore their agency and capacity for resistance, as well as complex relations on the ground. Much research has in fact underlined that distinctions between brokers and workers are often blurred and dynamics more horizontal than is widely acknowledged (Melossi 2021; Donatiello, Martone, and Moiso 2024). Moreover, workers sometimes choose recruiters, making decisions that negotiate gratitude, community loyalty, self-interest, resentment and resistance (Perrotta 2014; Poppi and Travaglione 2019, Associazione Terra 2021; Massari 2023).

While many small-scale farmers justify engaging illegal recruiters and/or exploiting workers due to their own market weakness and tight profit margins, there is evidence that

large businesses, with high profits, engage in such practices through rational choice: the financial benefits vastly outweigh risks of being caught or sanctioned (Omizzolo, 2021b). Many of these have no ties to traditional organised crime groups. Nevertheless, mafias are also active here. Donatiello, Martone, and Moiso (2022; 2024) show that food supply chains remain attractive to mafias as channels for exerting territorial power through protection/extortion, while facilitating laundering and reinvestment of criminal profits. In mafia-dense areas, such groups have penetrated multiple links in the chain, from harvesting to transportation, logistics, wholesale and retail (Lo Cascio 2018; UNHRC 2019). In particular, EU and national agricultural subsidies make it advantageous to intercept public funds (DIA 2022a; 2022b).

This sector is thus populated by conventional organised crime and by ‘disorganised’ actors (Reuter 1983): opportunistic entrepreneurs who merge legal and illegal processes, operating alone or through short-term, horizontal networks (Bouchard and Morselli 2014). While international discussions on organised and white-collar crime recognise that such fluidity is the norm (Holmes 2024), in Italy, much debate still focuses on how organised crime ‘infiltrates’ the legal economy. This terminology arguably perpetuates a mythical distinction between a healthy, legal economic ‘upperworld’ under attack by a criminal ‘underworld’, instead of foregrounding the structural forces that promote law-breaking. Such mafia-centric thinking is particularly evident in the widespread use of the term *agro-mafia*. This conflates mafia investments in agribusinesses (La Via Libera 2021), organised criminal – rather than specifically mafia – schemes (Treccani 2018), and generic ‘illegal activities in food supply chains’ (Legambiente 2023). To avoid such conceptual blurring, it is useful to adopt Holmes’ perspective here (2024, 201): ‘organised crime is primarily about and involves serious criminal activities; the actors engaging in it must also be factored in, but as a secondary consideration’.³

This focus on activities is reflected in how Italy’s legislation has evolved. In 2011, following worker protests in Puglia, Article 603-bis was inserted into the Criminal Code, establishing the crime of illegal recruitment/brokerage (*intermediazione*) and labour exploitation. It was soon criticised, though, for punishing recruiters only when their activity was demonstrably ‘organised’ and coercive (Gaboardi 2017). Moreover, it did not sanction employers at all. In 2016, Law 199 – which is still in place – was introduced to reform the framework. This amended Art. 603-bis, establishing clear indicators of exploitation, criminalising exploitative employment as well as brokerage, and eliminating the need to prove criminal organisation to convict.⁴ The law’s wording is purposely broad enough to target any sector and type of actor, while also addressing agriculture-specific problems like chronically low employment standards. Thanks to these reforms, investigations and prosecutions have increased in agriculture and beyond, within and outside mafia-dense areas.⁵ Most importantly for this study, though, the law extended beyond repression and introduced measures to prevent exploitation and protect victims, setting the basis for the state’s holistic anti-caporalato plan analysed below.

Beyond repression: collaborative governance against crime

Collaborative approaches to fighting crime have proliferated internationally in recent decades. These tend to be community-based policing projects that focus on improving law enforcement agencies’ local legitimacy and efficiency (Li 2017). Alternatively, they foreground collaborations between state agencies, with minimal citizen engagement (eg. Cels, De Jong, and Groenleer, n/d). Communities may help define strategies for reducing crime rates, but they are rarely called upon to identify and act on broader social dynamics underpinning crime. Conceptually, though, collaborative governance extends far beyond such policies. It entails building horizontal processes of decision-making and problem-solving

among multiple stakeholders (Douglas et al. 2020), with authority partially delegated away from the state. Such collaborations may span all phases of governance: from identifying a problem, to establishing and implementing policies, to evaluating results and rectifying failings (Peters et al. 2022). The extent to which public authorities direct these interactions exists along a spectrum bridging elements of state-centric control with diverging degrees of non-state actor autonomy.

The figures potentially involved are equally variegated. Multiple public agencies may join, as may diverse actors within a single bureaucracy, hoping to dismantle siloed approaches to composite problems (Douglas et al. 2020). Market players may also participate. However, with erosion of faith in the abilities of government and markets to resolve social problems alone, the need to embed civil society actors in governance networks has become widely recognised. The benefits of involving NGOs, citizen groups and unions are numerous: they strengthen the democratic legitimacy and accountability of policies and give voice to groups often excluded from traditional governance mechanisms. Moreover, they mobilise large numbers of people whose commitment may be deeper than that of businesses or public employees.

Nevertheless, Torfing (2020, 7–8) makes an important distinction between ‘governance in civil society’ and ‘governance with civil society’. In the former, social organisations take responsibility for alleviating problems of vulnerable groups underserved by the state. Crucial though their services are, they rarely have the funding and capacity to resolve multidimensional problems. Yet, in weak welfare systems like Italy (Albertini and Pavolini 2015), this is the primary model through which many social services are delivered, providing what can be considered ‘a cheap (and inefficient) surrogate for a retrenched welfare state’ (Della Porta 2020, 942). ‘Governance with civil society’ instead connects state agencies, the economy, and civil society actors through collaborations that are relatively long-term and institutionalised (Torfing 2020).

Italy has an expansive civil society presence, including in the fight against crime. The importance of organisations like Addiopizzo and Libera in promoting cultures of legality is widely documented (eg. Lipari and Andrighetto 2020), and the role of actors that support victims and partner with local government is now recognised internationally (GOCI 2023). Nevertheless, analyses of ‘anti-mafia’ tend to foreground the state’s legislative and repressive actions (La Spina 2019). Civil society activities are often treated as a positive – but ancillary – addition to the state’s efforts. In fact, in 2011, Cayli argued that the two spheres remained antagonistic rather than collaborative and stressed the need to connect top-down anti-mafia policies with the civil-society initiatives proliferating at the time. In particular, he called for a binding framework to coherently steer the mix of direct and indirect, macro- and micro-scale approaches. Whether this plea is now being responded to in Italy’s anti-caporalato strategy is the focus of the discussion below.

The analysis is based on two distinct sets of primary data sources. First, I draw on formal policy documents produced in the preparation and implementation of the National Plan, to identify its official priorities and goals, but also its gaps. These texts are then compared to grey literature produced by civil society actors (NGOs and external evaluators), as a first step towards assessing whether the strategy is effectively meeting its goals. Second, I carried out semi-structured interviews with 15 key stakeholders: five members of activist groups or NGOs providing aid to workers; three ethical food producers; two labour unions; two civil servants charged with formulating and implementing policy; and three independent observers monitoring projects. I identified the pool of potential interviewees through the existing documentation: I contacted NGO consortia, ethical producers and research teams listed in the annual reports of the National Plan, as well as ones referred to in grey and scholarly literature. I then interviewed those who gave their availability. Through a process

of snowball sampling, these then connected me to other interlocutors. I sought to achieve as broad a spread of perspectives and geographical contexts as possible. Thus, my interviewees came from a large range of regions: Piedmont, Tuscany, Lazio, Campania, Basilicata, Calabria, Puglia and Sicily. The higher presence of Southern actors reflects the fact that NGOs working there on labour exploitation are more numerous, and have been active for longer, than in central and northern areas. I also sought to reflect the perspectives of actors who are involved in the national strategy and those – mostly ethical food producers – who have chosen to remain external due to their critiques of its approach.

The interviews took place between May 2023 and September 2024 and lasted between 45 minutes and two hours each. These were recorded, with interviewees' informed consent. The structure of my questions, as well as the coding and analysis process, borrowed from the University of Utrecht's Collaborative Governance Case Database, which provides a questionnaire to organise reports of governance initiatives around core themes from the theoretical literature (Douglas et al. 2020).⁶ My account and analysis of the strategy loosely follows its structure in examining the external conditions and institutional context, the initiative's internal dynamics, and my informants' perspectives.

The National Action Plan on paper

As we have seen, labour exploitation is driven by intersecting and mutually reinforcing social, legal, economic and logistical forces. Law 199/2016 took a crucial step forward in acknowledging these intertwinements. Although it focused mostly on repression, it incorporated a holistic angle, delegating the Ministries of Labour, Agriculture and Interior to develop a plan for improving seasonal agricultural workers' conditions through logistical assistance and care initiatives, involving local authorities, employers, unions and third-sector organisations (NGOs). It also called for the expansion of Italy's Network of Quality Work in Agriculture to promote ethical farming.⁷ An annual report on the plan's implementation was then to be submitted to parliament.

The plan took some years to take shape. First, in 2018, an Inter-Institutional Committee was formed to devise a strategy for preventing exploitation, protecting victims, enforcing legislation, and developing pathways to legal employment and social inclusion. With logistical and financial input from the ILO and European Commission respectively, a multilevel structure emerged, involving 45 entities, organised into a three-year National Action Plan (2020–2022). This has since been refinanced for three more years.⁸ At its core are all the relevant national ministries, connected horizontally.⁹ The Labour Inspectorate, police forces, health, transportation and other territorial services are also integrated, as are regional and municipal governments. It is thus a primarily state-centric governance system heavily focused on coordinating public agencies. Nevertheless, it does incorporate civil society actors in two ways. Firstly, key unions, national-level NGOs and agricultural employers' associations are included in Working Groups responsible for the Plan's thematic priorities. Secondly, local and regional governments are charged with coordinating and delivering social services to vulnerable workers, many of which are provided by local NGOs financed through national and regional grants.

It was clear from the outset that although many public and non-governmental actors were providing essential services to workers, these were fragmented and uncoordinated, generating duplication in some spheres and gaps in others. Thus, an integrated service delivery system was needed to connect grassroots expertise with public services and law enforcement. Significant advances were made in mapping areas at highest risk of exploitation and the social initiatives locally available (MLPS 2021; 2022; 2023). The Plan's annual reports offered progressively more nuanced explanations of how macroscopic forces

impacted employers and workers and how migrants faced differential vulnerabilities, especially refugees and women. This increasingly fine-grained understanding was both outcome and driver of ever richer collaborative exchanges. While the first annual report retained a state-centric focus, by the conclusion of the three-year project, over 230 stakeholders were involved and over 100 agreements had been signed between public agencies (e.g. with local transport and health services) but also with employers and civil society, including universities, unions and NGOs (MLPS 2023). The Plan's architecture proved to be sophisticated, therefore, maintaining a coherent structure while also growing organically, drawing in relevant actors as it evolved.

The National Plan echoed scholarly knowledge of the dynamics of labour exploitation and best practices internationally, aiming to target meso-level factors that contribute to workers' vulnerability: reducing their geographic and social isolation, mitigating mistrust and avoidance of public services, improving mechanisms for legal recruitment, ensuring that law enforcement protects rather than punishes workers, and deterring employers through frequent inspections and sanctions (UNHRC 2019; Melossi 2021; Palumbo, Corrado, and Triandafyllidou 2022). Nevertheless, scholars' evaluations have been mixed. On one hand, certain initiatives, such as a collaboration between the Labour Inspectorate and the International Organization for Migration, which deploys IOM mediators to communicate with workers and earn their trust, have been applauded (Palumbo 2024). In purely law enforcement terms, inspections and judicial interventions have increased.¹⁰ Meanwhile, some employer organisations have sought to disincentivise exploitation, such as farmers' consortia that expel members found to illegally recruit workers (Donatiello, Martone, and Moiso 2024). On the other hand, there has been criticism of Italy's application of international legal frameworks on trafficking and exploitation. Palumbo (2024), for example, shows how legislative gaps have hampered support and empowerment for victims in practice. Moreover, state protections that do exist are bureaucratically cumbersome, only offering short-term residency permits that do not combat the real barriers to entering Italy's formal labour market. Labour inspections remain too sparse to be a real deterrent, and some meso-level institutions designed to facilitate collaborations have been slow to develop (Palumbo 2024). Perhaps the Plan's most glaring weakness has been its failure to promote a unified ethical farming sector. The Network of Quality Work in Agriculture was intended to be a key pillar of the strategy. By 2022, however, only 5,262 farms had joined (representing 3 per cent of farms that employ workers [AIC 2022]) and by January 2024 this had only risen to 6,600 (Macrì and Orsini 2024).

Collaborations in practice: perspectives from the field

While the above criticisms are well-founded, my interviews with civil society actors revealed important nuances. If we view the National Plan as an evolving apparatus through which problems and disconnections can be identified and, hopefully, resolved, it has had some successes. For example, interviewees have noted increased coordination between labour inspectors and some public prosecutors' offices, speeding up workers' legal protection to address some of the bureaucratic slowness. Such public agency collaborations have primarily emerged at the local level since the problems they tackle are often territorially specific and require that individuals initiate and cultivate personalised partnerships. As one interviewee put it: 'each situation is different, unique. So you can't have a template that works everywhere. It all depends on the human material available and whether there are a few individuals who want to make changes and work together'. Indeed, this echoes scholarship which finds that most governance with civil society occurs locally because this is where 'there is greater proximity between public and private actors, and citizens and their civic organizations can see what is at stake, what they can influence, and how they will benefit

from joint solutions' (Torfing 2020,16). Representatives of two separate NGOs, for example, recounted how their training of local police and trade unionists had greatly improved the sensitivity with which these approached vulnerable workers. One stated: 'before, officers just cared about the employers and arresting those breaking the law. Now they try to talk to the workers, they realise they have to be trusted, not scare them off. So they ask them what they need and try to connect them to local services.' In relation to trade unionists, another declared: 'they didn't use to pay attention to those who were undocumented or working informally [*in nero*], because those people can't join unions. They didn't see them as their problem. Now they understand that to protect workers you have to also pay attention to their housing, transportation and family situations. Everything is connected.' A further observer pointed out that 'there has been a big change in the way unions deal with situations now that formerly exploited labourers have started to work with them as cultural mediators. This means you get real dialogue and the voices of workers start to be heard up the ladder.'

A core area of success has been in building and supporting NGO consortia through which organisations join forces and streamline services. Where possible, these have integrated with local public agencies to create cohesive referral systems to meet victims' individualised needs. The most advanced examples are the Integrated Social Hubs (*Poli sociali integrati*) piloted in 36 high-risk locations in the South. Although their effectiveness depends on the existing capacity of local public and NGO services, these have been found pivotal in improving workers' protections and care (De Angelis 2023). Another initiative is the creation of an Anticaporalato Helpdesk that operates 24/7 in 14 languages, accessible through multiple channels, which connects workers – many in conditions of grave exploitation – to the nearest services (Nova 2024). Since over half the users have been outside the five southern regions where the Helpdesk operates, discussions are underway to expand it nationally. This makes it just one example of geographic cross-pollinations that the Plan has fostered, with NGOs in the North learning best practices from their Southern counterparts who have been in the sector longer. The grants channelled through the National Plan have been fundamental at a time of otherwise shrinking funding to social infrastructures. In many cases this money has served to offer victims immediate emergency help – to access residency permits, legal support, short-term housing and work – but in others it has enabled them to develop independent businesses or other paths to long-term economic autonomy. For example, one organisation offers some 'integration budgets' of around 12,000 euros per individual to invest in financial stability.

These initiatives, like other successful projects financed by the Plan, originated as grassroots innovations. With time, best practices have filtered upwards, influencing decision-making at the regional and national levels. A notable example is the above-mentioned collaboration between labour inspectors and IOM mediators, which was inspired by a local NGO project that first connected police officers with cultural mediators. Thus, various grassroots actors who previously felt that they were working in isolation, disconnected from the state, now have more structured channels for informing policy. As one interviewee stated: 'we have brought people's needs to where policies are defined, where decisions are made on how to allocate funds, and how to implement general principles.'

Interviewees, however, also expressed frustrations about the Plan's priorities and effectiveness. A strong critique is that it addresses the most traditional forms of caporalato while insufficiently tackling white-collar exploitation through fraud and subcontracting mechanisms that violate labour protections. One interviewee, working in the North, underlined: 'more than half the workers we intercept are documented, they even have contracts. They work for legal cooperatives, but these underpay them or declare fewer hours worked, so later they can't access unemployment benefits. And the working conditions are still

terrible: hours under the sun with no breaks, long travel to the fields and indecent housing.' Another major challenge is the failure, so far, to create an efficient system to connect workers to employers. While the Plan aims to make Italy's public employment centres more attractive to both sides and promote digital platforms to match labour supply and demand, this has not occurred. An observer argued: 'The employment centres have no idea about harvest times, and when farms will need workers. One centre here published job adverts after the harvest was over and the workers had left. They still focus on traditional jobs and on Italian workers and they often can't handle the bureaucratic problems that foreigners have.'¹¹ Some NGOs have consequently developed apps to connect workers to employers in real-time, but these remain localised and fragmented. None have managed to scale upwards and create a unified and trusted system that can replace the word-of-mouth and personal networks through which recruitment currently operates.

The problem of institutional capacity was also raised in relation to many small municipalities that struggle to coordinate anti-exploitation initiatives due to lack of personnel. Although the state has allocated 200 million euros to create decent housing for agricultural workers (MLPS n/d), the requirement that 90 per cent of that money be spent by the end of 2025 was impossible for many to meet. Similarly, the goal of extending transport services to serve labourers' routes to work has had disparate responses, depending on individual bus companies' willingness to channel resources accordingly. Thus, the Plan's objective that the state, together with civil society partners, should replace the speed and flexibility with which caporali meet the interconnected needs of workers remains unfulfilled. Legal labour intermediation mechanisms are inadequate, the ability to travel to work autonomously is limited, access to housing is improving but informal encampments and dilapidated buildings are still widespread. A core paradox is that the Plan cannot fund initiatives targeting undocumented migrants, yet these are often the workers most vulnerable to blackmail and exploitation.

Although NGO networks try to compensate for such gaps in the state's reach, fragmentation remains the norm and there is a real shortage of actors in some areas. One observer explained: 'the third sector is not homogeneous, it changes all the time and good initiatives don't always last. There are often very few actors fighting in a given location, sometimes no more than ten people: a few people in a local union, a small NGO, some police officers. But in other places there are dozens of organisations focusing on caporalato. It depends where you are and whether there are enough motivated people.' Tensions also exist between organisations that perceive themselves as competitors for public funds. One interviewee argued that many NGOs are *progettifici*: project mills that continuously adapt initiatives to the available funds, thereby failing to build continuity and expertise. A fundamental problem is that the Plan perpetuates organisations' dependency on short-term grants whose renewal is never certain, which in turn produces a precarious and underpaid workforce. As one interviewee stated, 'once the grant ends, we have to wait months or even years to find out if additional funds will be available.'¹² Networks similarly tend to disband when funds dry up, undermining the Plan's intention of fostering stable horizontal collaborations. While some have achieved remarkable continuity despite these circumstances, their members attribute this to their own capacity to diversify funding streams. For many others, though, financial precarity has made it impossible to maintain projects or expand them regionally or nationally.

Vertical collaborations between grassroots actors and public agencies can also be difficult. Most local NGOs do not sit on the Plan's national Working Groups; rather, they are represented by the lead partner in their consortium. This filtering of perspectives has resulted in weak upward communication and mutual understanding. One representative sitting on a Working Group explained: 'we are treated like outsiders. The idea of

administrative subsidiarity is very recent in Italian policy and many public institutions still struggle with it. They don't see us as policy actors ..., as proper policy stakeholders.' Some also complain that employers' organisations are much more vocal than NGOs in these national fora, creating further imbalances. In the absence of a strong institutionalised voice, some grassroots actors seek personalised dialogue with politicians but, here too, relations are often short-term and unstable. One interviewee summarised the overarching situation thus: 'it is positive that we now have stronger policies against labour exploitation, but it is a shame that the attention devoted to the problem by the system and the politicians is only intermittent.'

Evaluating Italy's collaborative governance model

The strongest criticism of the anti-caporalato strategy made by all interviewees concerned its inability to resolve the two fundamental engines of agricultural labour exploitation: Italy's dysfunctional immigration legislation (Law 189/2002, known as the Bossi-Fini) and an agri-food industry that promotes mass production while doing little to support environmentally and socially sustainable farming. One succinctly argued: 'as long as the state sees foreigners as nothing but cheap labour, with no rights, nothing will change. Politicians don't care about how the food is produced, what is important is that voters don't complain about rising prices.' Among these glaring structural failures, though, interviewees did identify some small positives. While they all agreed that Italy's immigration regime is hostage to political opportunism, making reform unlikely, some pointed to the significant expansion of entry quotas for 2023–2025 as an indicator that, at least informally, pressures from employers and activists to improve legal immigration channels are heard.¹³ Similarly, Italy's implementation of two key measures for improving agricultural conditions were strongly championed by the National Plan: firstly, the transposition into national law of EU Directive 2019/633 on unfair trading practices in agricultural and food supply chains (D.lgs. 198/2021). Together with the 'Agriculture Decree' (DL 63/2024), these laws ban the sale of food products at prices below production costs, as well as double-down auctions that previously forced farmers to undercut each other to sell to wholesalers and supermarkets. Secondly, Italy was one of the first countries to implement a social conditionality clause in the EU's 2023–2027 Common Agricultural Policy, two years before it became mandatory. This causes farmers to risk losing CAP subsidies if caught violating labour rights.¹⁴ The Italian government's vocal support of these mechanisms can be read as a further upward effect of the National Plan, for which these reforms were priorities.

The ethical farmers I interviewed argued, however, that many of their problems remain unaddressed. Over-bureaucratisation continues and they are burdened by rising overhead costs. None see the Network of Quality Work in Agriculture as a solution. One simply stated: 'the Network is a joke, a failure'. Another explained: 'it offers no market advantage; there is no logo or labelling system that would make the products recognisable for buyers, and we would still have to sell through the supermarkets that squeeze us. We need a proper alternative distribution network so we can share transport and sales outlets. The people who buy from us are willing to accept our higher prices; they are committed to ethical consumption. But there aren't many who can afford that.' Thus, while Italy has a thriving constellation of social cooperatives and alternative food producers (Fonte and Cucco 2017), these are largely separate from the Network. As one put it, 'the state does nothing to support us. It doesn't care about sustainability.' Moreover, there is no real system to monitor whether self-proclaimed ethical producers are fully able to avoid all forms of exploitation. Indeed, two external observers referred to 'ethical' farms where recruitment and working conditions were worryingly similar to those under caporalato, caused by limited alternative systems for finding workers and employing them legally. One ethical farmer stated

that workers are often not interested in staying long-term, listing various employees who abandoned his farm as soon as better opportunities opened in Northern factories. Thus, even where worker rights are respected, the structural problems of finding and retaining employees in such a competitive market, while also maintaining minimal profit, means that only the most socially committed employers persevere. Indeed, one farmer put it bluntly: 'most employers have enough trouble surviving financially, they really are not interested in thinking about employing workers in better ways.'

Ideally, collaborative governance mechanisms should foster strong interdependence, trust and communication between constituents. The above discussion shows that while horizontal exchanges have improved between public agencies and between grassroots organisations, the system struggles to connect the two. Decision-making remains primarily top-down, dissipating valuable knowledge of those most exposed to the local, shifting conditions affecting exploitation. Civil society voices are heard, but they remain subordinate; they can only influence the system on the state's terms. There is no space for agonistic involvement (Dean 2018) that could alter state actors' perspectives and priorities. Borrowing from Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh's integrative model for analysing collaborative mechanisms, we can conclude that Italy's National Plan has achieved some interactive processes of 'discovery, definition, deliberation, and determination' (2012, 13), but not to the full degree of governance coproduction it could have done. Similarly, trust, legitimacy, mutual understanding and shared motivation have been hampered by the limited space for grassroots actors' upward influence. Consequently, while knowledge and resources circulate, real joint action has been sporadic rather than the norm. In terms of the Plan's impacts so far, it has improved the lives of some exploited workers and will hopefully expand to empower many others. However, aside from the subtle reorientation of some national policies, it has not altered the external structures that produce the racialised inequalities under capitalism that perpetuate workers' vulnerability (Dines 2022; Palumbo 2024).

It should be stressed, though, that collaborative governance on this scale is a meso-level process; it cannot be expected to produce major overhauls in structural problems quickly. As a mechanism for 'steering the economy and society toward collective goals' (Peters et al. 2022, 8), it has shifted Italy's responses to agricultural exploitation from disconnected, ad-hoc initiatives towards greater planning and, crucially, recognition that the state is responsible for prevention and protection, beyond repression. Indeed, the Plan's refinancing for a further three years reflects the understanding that change at a grassroots level takes time and economic continuity. Moreover, co-governance systems should be able to adapt to evolving knowledge. The insistence by many interviewees that the state must fight less overt forms of exploitation has been met by the creation of a National Plan Against Undeclared Work (2023–2025) as an offshoot of the anti-caporalato strategy.¹⁵ While it is too early to evaluate its activities, its inception signals that expertise developed in agriculture can inform other sectors where dynamics of exploitation and white-collar crime are less known.

Conclusions

While the National Plan's documentation maps labour exploitation – and responses to it – through quantitative data, this qualitative analysis has highlighted the heterogeneity of perspectives and experiences in trying to apply multidimensional policy initiatives within Italy's complex agricultural panorama. It has also confirmed that policy outcomes are often nuanced: neither full failures nor successes. Piecing together a mosaic such as this can never provide a complete picture of all the levels and intricate workings of policy. Inevitably, each person interviewed for this study advanced a specific, and often narrow, perspective. Given the fast-changing nature of criminal activities and their inevitable opacity, such accounts

also lacked precise data on illegal dynamics. These difficulties are intrinsic to studying hidden economies and can only be mitigated through triangulation of perspectives, such as those included in this article, and through further scholarly investigation that combines macroscopic lenses accounting for political-economic forces with the lived experiences of those on the ground.

Despite such challenges, this study has shown how Italy's anti-caporalato Plan is in many ways contradictory and problematic. It has also demonstrated, though, that the state's investment in systems to support and coordinate with grassroots actors previously passively delegated to providing social welfare has produced an important shift from 'governance *in* civil society' to 'governance *with* civil society' (Torfing 2020, 7–8). This reflects a growing understanding that complex social problems need multi-dimensional, multi-actor responses. The harnessing of civil society expertise could, arguably, be taken into the fight against organised and white-collar crime more broadly. While the Plan shows that collaborative governance cannot resolve overarching structural problems, it can eliminate red tape and some of the financial limitations facing grassroots actions. It also fosters alliances and new ways of addressing old but evolving problems, giving voice to actors that the state does not otherwise hear or support – those that deal with crime in their daily personal and working lives.

Strikingly, the National Plan lacks focused discussion of the role of organised crime in the economic and political geographies of Italian agriculture. Its documentation only makes passing reference to using confiscated mafia assets and the participation of one Libera branch in an integration project (MLPS 2023). My interviews similarly found patchy involvement of anti-mafia organisations in grassroots anti-caporalato activities. An opportunity seems to have been missed here to build more solid and long-term bridges between civil society actors working on interlinked social justice issues. Organised (and disorganised) crime thrives on inequalities and on the obstacles that disadvantaged actors face to surviving in the legal economy. Yet, much grassroots work perpetuates the focus on actors – rather than on processes – critiqued above. Initiatives targeting vulnerable migrant workers, or victims of loansharking and extortion, or competing against mafia businesses, are essential. However, they often remain siloed, focusing on specific criminal groups and practices rather than on the fluid ways in which such activities spread and evolve.

As the boundaries between organised and disorganised crime increasingly blur, with mafias investing in legal sectors and white-collar actors taking advantage of bureaucratic opacities to make illegal profits, more expansive collaborations are needed between state and grassroots actors. These should focus on prevention: on developing systems for 'crime-proofing' at-risk sectors more innovatively than through adding further layers of bureaucracy. Involving the expertise of trusted entrepreneurs and civil society actors could offer insights beyond the state-centric enforcement-based approaches of the present. At the same time, non-traditional criminal organisations are emerging in some Italian cities, establishing territorial power through drug markets, extortion and alternative welfare systems (author, forthcoming 2026). These often replicate the intimidatory tactics of traditional mafias in areas where anti-mafia resistance has not had time to develop. Here too, collaborations are needed to channel existing expertise towards supporting these communities.

Such approaches would take us some steps towards Cayli's (2011) call for more structured interconnection between top-down policies and bottom-up initiatives, between crime-fighting and sociocultural innovation. It would also permit more systematic integration of activists' and scholars' understandings of the structural and economic *drivers* of crime beyond its expressions. Indeed, one of the most valuable aspects of the anti-caporalato strategy has been the research it has promoted, including data collection on the relative

successes of initiatives across the country, permitting evidence-based analysis of best practices that can be replicated. We need to move beyond grassroots resistance against mafias towards finding new ways to co-govern territories and vulnerable economic sectors by bringing the most exposed social and economic actors into collaborative dialogue and policy-building, while – ideally – learning from the weaknesses of the anti-caporalato strategy.

Acknowledgements. I am very grateful to all my interviewees for the many hours of their time that they dedicated to helping me with this project.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Notes

1. See Art. 416-bis of the Italian criminal code. Translation available at: <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/b8efae/pdf/>
2. See <https://tinyurl.com/wwwwrmyt>
3. In this article, I refer to components of this criminal panorama as follows: *mafias* are organisations ‘whose members use the power of intimidation deriving from the bonds of membership, the state of subjugation and conspiracy of silence that it engenders to commit offences’ (Art. 416-bis criminal code) and have been recognised as such by the state. *Organised crime groups* refer to ‘a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established in accordance with this Convention, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit’ (Art. 2a UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime). These do not necessarily use intimidation of local populations. *White collar crime* is generally understood to be non-violent and carried out by people in positions of power, often through their professional work. It includes fraud, money laundering, tax evasion, corruption, funding of terrorism etc (see Zagaris, 2015). *Disorganised crime* refers to activities that lack ‘central coordination and control’ and that are instead fragmented and individualised (Beare, 2012, see also Reuter, 1983).
4. Note that the term *caporalato* does not appear in law.
5. See <https://www.ispettorato.gov.it/attivita-studi-e-statistiche/monitoraggio-e-report/rapporti-annuali-sullattivita-di-vigilanza-in-materia-di-lavoro-e-previdenziale/>
6. <https://collaborativegovernancecasedatabase.sites.uu.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/637/2020/08/Collaborative-Governance-Case-Database-v1.5.pdf>
7. For details see <https://www.inps.it/it/it/dettaglio-scheda.it.schede-servizio-strumento.schede-servizi.la-rete-del-lavoro-agricolo-di-qualit-50213.la-rete-del-lavoro-agricolo-di-qualit-.html>
8. At the time of my fieldwork, which ended in September 2024, meetings of the Plan’s committees had resumed but focused primarily on maintaining existing projects and collaborations rather than developing new ones.
9. <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/immigrazione/focus-on/Tavolo-caporalato/Documents/Piano-Triennale-post-CU.pdf>
10. See <https://www.adir.unifi.it/laboratorio/index.htm>
11. These accounts are echoed in Giubileo and Marocco (2024), who highlight that these offices remain underfunded and short of expert personnel, especially in the South.
12. The paradox of the state’s dependency on the third sector to provide core social services, while forcing it to operate in conditions of major financial precarity and vulnerability, is highlighted in two recent books from the field (Vesco and Belloni, 2024; Morniroli and G. Scancarello, 2025).
13. However, it is widely acknowledged that these quotas remain vastly inadequate and the processes for applying unnecessarily complicated.
14. There is debate about how far these provisions will affect vulnerable workers, since they only concern direct CAP payments and not other subsidies (Willard 2023).
15. See <https://tinyurl.com/4cxbp35x> and <https://tinyurl.com/2b27kx3m>

References

- Albertini, M. and E. Pavolini. 2015. ‘Care Policies in Italy between a National Frozen Landscape and Local Dynamism’. In *The Italian Welfare State in a European Perspective: A Comparative Analysis*, edited by U. Ascoli and E. Pavolini, 133–156. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

- AIC (Associazione Italiana Coltivatori). 2022. 'Rete del lavoro agricolo di qualità: Una spallata alla concorrenza sleale'. <https://www.aicnazionale.com/notizie/rete-del-lavoro-agricolo-di-qualita-una-spallata-alla-concorrenza-sleale/>
- Associazione Terra. 2021. 'E(U)xploitation. Gangmastering: The Southern Question. Italy, Spain and Greece'. <https://www.associazioneterra.it/cosa-facciamo/filiere-e-caporalato/inchiesta-euxploitation>
- Bagnardi, F. 2024. 'Caporalato (Italy)'. In *The Global Encyclopaedia of Informality*, Vol. 3, edited by A. Ledeneva, 320–322. London: UCL Press.
- Beare, M. E. 2012. Disorganized Crime: Reuter's Thesis. In *Encyclopedia of Transnational Crime & Justice*, edited by M. E. Beare, 109–110. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bouchard, M. and C. Morselli. 2014. 'Opportunistic Structures of Organized Crime'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Organized Crime*, edited by L. Paoli, 288–302. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Caruso, F. and A. Corrado, eds. 2021. *Essenziali ma invisibili: Analisi delle politiche e delle iniziative di contrasto allo sfruttamento e per l'inclusione dei lavoratori migranti in agricoltura nel sud Italia*. Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier.
- Cayli, B. 2011. 'Anti-Mafia Policies in Italy: The Need for Collaborative Governance and Transition of the Policy Actors from Isolation to Coalition'. *European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice* 19 (1): 15–36.
- Cels, S., J. De Jong and M.L.P. Groenleer. n/d. 'Okay, here's how it goes (Fight Against Organized Crime, Motorcycle Club)'. *The Collaborative Governance Case Database*. www.collaborationdatabase.org.
- De Angelis, P. 2023. I Poli sociali integrati. Una sperimentazione di prevenzione e presa in carico dei lavoratori vulnerabili in agricoltura. I risultati salienti della valutazione. In *Il lavoro dignitoso e il suo contrario*, edited by F. Carchedi, 217–240. Santarcangelo di Romagna: Maggioli.
- Dean, R. J. 2018. 'Counter-Governance: Citizen Participation beyond Collaboration'. *Politics and Governance* 6 (1): 180–188.
- Della Porta, D. 2020. 'Building Bridges: Social Movements and Civil Society in Times of Crisis'. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 31: 938–948.
- DIA (Direzione investigativa antimafia). 2022a. 'Relazione semestrale al parlamento. Gennaio-Giugno'.
- DIA (Direzione investigativa antimafia). 2022b. 'Relazione semestrale al parlamento. Luglio-Dicembre'.
- Dines, N. 2023. 'After Entry: Humanitarian Exploitation and Migrant Labour in the Fields of Southern Italy'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 41(1): 74–91.
- Donatiello, D., V. Martone and V. Moiso. 2022. 'La filiera agroalimentare tra sfruttamento, caporalato ed ecoreati. Evoluzione del fenomeno e prospettive di contrasto'. In *Agromafie e caporalato. Sesto rapporto*, edited by Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 31–52. Rome: Futura.
- Donatiello, D., V. Martone and V. Moiso. 2024. 'Ingiustizia sociale e ambientale nella filiera agroalimentare. Sfruttamento, caporalato ed ecoreati'. In *Agromafie e caporalato. Settimo rapporto*, edited by Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 33–66. Rome: Futura.
- Douglas, S., C. Ansell, C.F. Parker, E. Sørensen, P. 'T Hart and J. Torfing. 2020. 'Understanding Collaboration: Introducing the Collaborative Governance Case Databank'. *Policy and Society* 39 (4): 495–509.
- Emerson, K., T. Nabatchi and S. Balogh. 2012. 'An Integrative Framework for Collaborative Governance'. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 22 (1): 1–29.
- Fonte, M. and I. Cucco. (2017). 'Cooperatives and Alternative Food Networks in Italy. The Long Road Towards a Social Economy in Agriculture'. *Journal of Rural Studies* 53, 291–302.
- Franciosi, U. 2022. 'Il caso Italpizza: Una strada da seguire'. In *Agromafie e caporalato. Sesto rapporto*, edited by Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 53–65. Rome: Futura.
- Gaboardi, A. 2017. 'Commento alla legge 199/2016'. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.laegislazionepenale.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/studi_gaboardi2017.pdf
- Giubileo, F. and M. Marocco. 2024. 'Il piano di potenziamento dei centri per l'impiego'. *INAPP*. <https://oa.inapp.gov.it/items/ad29736d-abce-4dcf-b713-bd3c42ea6c68>
- GOCI. 2023. 'Global Organized Crime Index, Italy'. <https://ocindex.net/>
- Holmes, L. 2024. *Rethinking Organised Crime*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Iannuzzi, F. E, and D. Sacchetto. 2022. 'Outsourcing and Workers' Resistance Practices in Venice's Hotel Industry: The Role of Migrants Employed by Cooperatives'. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 43 (2): 877–897. DOI: [10.1177/0143831X20960227](https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X20960227).
- Ippolito, I., D. Perrotta and T. Raeymaekers, eds.. 2021. *Braccia rubate dall'agricoltura: Pratiche di sfruttamento del lavoro migrante*. Turin: SEB27.
- La Spina, A. 2019. 'The Anti-Mafia Fight in Italy and Abroad'. In *Italian Mafias Today: Territory, Business and Politics*, edited by F. Allum, I. Clough Marinaro and R. Sciarone, 225–240. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- La Via Libera. 2021. 'Combattere le agromafie per proteggere salute e ambiente'. <https://lavialibera.it/it-schede-507-agromafie>

- Legambiente. 2023. 'Agromafia'. <https://noecomafia.legambiente.it/agromafia/>
- Li, M. 2017. 'Collaborative Governance and Partnerships in Policing'. *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 5: 50–58.
- Lipari, F. and G. Andrighetto. 2020. 'The Change in Social Norms in the Mafia's Territories: The Anti-Racket Movement of Addiopizzo'. *Journal of Institutional Economics* 17, 227–242.
- Lo Cascio, M. 2018. 'Un prodotto Dop in terra di mafia. Le olive da tavola Nocellara in Sicilia'. *Meridiana* 93: 91–112.
- Macrì, M.C. and S. Orsini. 2024. 'Policy Instruments to Improve Foreign Workforce's Position and Social Sustainability of the Agriculture in Italy'. *Sustainability* 16 (12): 4998.
- Massari, M. 2023. 'Migrant Work Exploitation and Resistance in the Italian Countryside: Precarious Lives between Violence and Agency'. In *Handbook of Research on the Global Political Economy of Work*, edited by M. Atzeni, D. Azzellini, A. Mezzadri, P. Moore, and U. Apitzsch, 302–311. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. DOI: [10.4337/9781839106583.00036](https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839106583.00036)
- Melossi, E. 2021. "'Ghetto Tomatoes" and "Taxi Drivers": The Exploitation and Control of Sub-Saharan African Tomato Pickers in Puglia, Southern Italy'. *Journal of Rural Studies* 88: 491–499.
- MLPS (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali). 2021. Relazione sul primo anno di attuazione del Piano triennale di contrasto allo sfruttamento lavorativo in agricoltura e al caporalato. <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/immigrazione/focus-on/Tavolo-caporalato/Documents/Relazione-al-Parlamento-prima-annualita-Piano-caporalato-2020-2022.pdf>
- MLPS. 2022. Relazione sul secondo anno di attuazione del Piano triennale di contrasto allo sfruttamento lavorativo in agricoltura e al caporalato. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.lavoro.gov.it/Caporalato_Relazione_al_Parlamento_2021-2022
- MLPS. 2023. Relazione sul terzo anno di attuazione del Piano triennale di contrasto allo sfruttamento lavorativo in agricoltura e al caporalato. <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/documenti/piano-caporalato-terza-annualita-relazione-al-parlamento-2022-2023>
- MLPS. n/d. 'M5C2 Investimento 2.2'. <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/strumenti-e-servizi/attuazione-interventi-pnrr/pagine/m5c2-inv-2-2>
- Morniroli, A. and G. Scancarello. 2025. *Non facciamo del bene: Inchiesta sul lavoro sociale tra agire politico e funzione pubblica*. Rome: Donzelli.
- Nova. 2024. 'Bilancio sociale 2023'. <https://www.consortionova.it/bilancio-sociale/>
- Omizzolo, M., ed. 2021a. *Articolo 1. L'Italia è una Repubblica fondata sul lavoro sfruttato*. Modena: Infinito.
- Omizzolo, M. 2021b. *La quinta mafia*. Bari: Radici Future.
- Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, ed. 2022. *Agromafie e caporalato. Sesto rapporto*. Rome: Futura.
- Palumbo, L. 2024. *Taking Vulnerabilities to Labour Exploitation Seriously: A Critical Analysis of Legal and Policy Approaches and Instruments in Europe*. Cham: Springer.
- Palumbo L., A. Corrado and A. Triandafyllidou. 2022. 'Migrant Labour in the Agri-Food System in Europe: Unpacking the Social and Legal Factors of Exploitation'. *European Journal of Migration and Law* 24 (2): 179–192.
- Perrotta, D. 2014. 'Vecchi e nuovi mediatori. Storia, geografia ed etnografia del caporalato in agricoltura'. *Meridiana* 79: 193–220.
- Perrotta D. and T. Raeymaekers. 2023. 'Caporalato Capitalism. Labour Brokerage and Agrarian Change in a Mediterranean Society'. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 50 (5): 2002–2023.
- Peruzzi, G. and V. Piro. 2024. 'Cooperative e lavoro migrante in agricoltura e nella logistica'. *Economia e Società Regionale* 1: 74–86. DOI: [10.3280/ES2024-001006](https://doi.org/10.3280/ES2024-001006)
- Peters, B.G., J. Pierre, E. Sørensen and J. Torfing. 2022. *A Research Agenda for Governance*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Poppi, F.I.M. and G.A. Travaglini. 2019. 'Parea Non Servin: Strategies of Exploitation and Resistance in the Caporalato Discourse'. *Modern Italy* 24 (1): 81–97.
- Reuter, P. 1983. *Disorganized Crime: The Economics of the Visible Hand*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Scaturro, R. 2021. 'Modern Slavery Made in Italy. Causes and Consequences of Labour Exploitation in the Italian Agricultural Sector'. *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development* 3 (2): 181–189.
- Scaturro, R. 2024. 'The Italian Recipe. Civil Society a Key Building Block of Resilience to Organized Crime'. <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/italy-civil-society-resilience-organized-crime-mafia/>
- Sullivan, H. and C. Skelcher. 2002. *Working across Boundaries. Collaboration in Public Services*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Torfing, J. 2020. 'Governance Through Civil Society'. In *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Treccani. 2018. 'Agromafia'. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/agromafia_\(altro\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/agromafia_(altro)/)

- UNHRC (UN Human Rights Council). 2019. 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, Including its Causes and Consequences, on her Visit to Italy'. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3877206?ln=en&v=pdf>
- Vesco, A. and G. Belloni, eds. 2024. *L'assedio del sociale: Il terzo settore tra criminalità, mercato e politica*. Milan: Mimesis.
- Willard, M. 2023. 'CAP Social Conditionality: A Game Changer for Farm Workers?' <https://www.arc2020.eu/cap-social-conditionality/>
- Zagaris, B. 2015. *International White Collar Crime: Cases and Materials*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Isabella Clough Marinaro is Professor of Sociology and Italian Studies at John Cabot University, Rome. She has published widely on housing, poverty and policy processes affecting minorities in Italy. Her current research focuses on social change in Rome, evolving forms of crime nationally, and how social movements campaign on issues of crime, legislative reform, and social justice. She has published a monographic book focusing on multidimensional informalities in the capital, which traces empirical and theoretical connections between housing, street trade, informal money lending and the waste/circular economy (*Inhabiting Liminal Spaces: Informalities in Governance, Housing, and Economic Activity in Contemporary Italy*, Routledge, 2022). She has also co-edited the following books: *Global Rome: Changing Faces of the Eternal City* (Indiana University Press, 2014) and *Italian Mafias Today: Territory, Business and Politics* (Edward Elgar, 2019). A new co-edited open access book on Rome is forthcoming: *Living Rome: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Belonging* (Lever, 2026).

Italian summary

Le dinamiche dello sfruttamento del lavoro in agricoltura in Italia stanno attirando un'attenzione crescente, sia a livello nazionale che internazionale. A partire dal 2016, sono state introdotte riforme legislative e numerose iniziative di policy volte ad affrontare alcuni dei fattori che alimentano lo sfruttamento, sia all'interno sia al di fuori delle aree tradizionalmente associate alla presenza mafiosa. Mentre gran parte della letteratura si è concentrata sull'efficacia della normativa e delle attività di enforcement, minore attenzione è stata riservata alle dimensioni più innovative di tali politiche. Riconoscendo che la sola repressione non è sufficiente a scoraggiare lo sfruttamento criminale dei lavoratori, l'Italia ha elaborato un modello di governance collaborativa con la società civile, con l'obiettivo di mobilitare e rafforzare gli attori locali per affrontare le cause strutturali di questi fenomeni. Il presente articolo valuta in che misura questo approccio di governance collaborativa stia riuscendo a raggiungere i propri obiettivi. L'analisi si basa su letteratura grigia e su interviste semi-strutturate condotte con attori della società civile impegnati nel contrasto allo sfruttamento 'dal basso' — sindacalisti, attivisti, ONG, osservatori indipendenti e produttori agroalimentari alternativi. Ispirandosi agli studi sulla governance collaborativa, il contributo individua punti di forza e di debolezza del modello, discutendo se esso possa rappresentare una strategia efficace per contrastare la criminalità organizzata e quella dei colletti bianchi in Italia, andando oltre i sistemi tradizionali 'antimafia'.