



Incorporating social dimensions and sustainable marketing into an agri-food company's development strategy

Brunella Arru^{*a}, Roberto Furesi^b, Pietro Pulina^b, Fabio A. Madau^b

^a University of Bari "Aldo Moro", Italy

^b University of Sassari, Italy

Abstract

Including sustainability in the corporate strategy is the main way for a company to be competitive and thrive in the long term. In this scenario, sustainable marketing is a strategic and evolutionary approach that is gaining considerable importance. It is focused on developing future-oriented solutions in the market while considering environmental, social, and ethical aspects to generate effects on entire systems in terms of institutions, value chains, or sectors. The agri-food sector experiences growing awareness and concern among stakeholders about not only the environmental but also the social and ethical aspects. This can translate into market opportunities for companies that differentiate themselves from competitors by offering products that reassure and comfort the consumer. This paper aims to investigate the role of the social dimension expressed in its leading indicators within an agri-food company's sustainable marketing strategy and the benefits or risks that can be recognized within a growth strategy with local and international markets. Specifically, using the qualitative, in-depth single case study methodology, the research explores how a medium-sized dairy company located in a geographical area characterized by high limitations integrated its social dimension within its business philosophy and how this

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* *Corresponding author:* Brunella Arru - Department of Soil, Plant and Food Sciences (DISSPA) - University of Bari Aldo Moro, Bari - Via Amendola 165/A, 70126, Bari (Italy). E-mail: brarru@uniss.it.

integration is at the basis of its strategy of covering historical markets, commercial development in the Italian market and expansion towards foreign markets. Considering the new market scenarios, the study significantly contributes to policymakers, practitioners, and academic debate on the social sustainability dimension in agriculture.

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Introduction

Nowadays, companies that want to increase or even maintain their value must achieve sustainability objectives (Rodríguez-Olalla & Avilés-Palacios, 2017) and integrate them into the management philosophy, rethinking, redesigning and redeveloping activities in a more sustainable way (Ajmal *et al.*, 2018; Maas *et al.*, 2018). This is because in an increasingly globalized market, including sustainability in a company's business strategy is the only way to survive and thrive in the long term (Epstein, 2008; Trivedi *et al.*, 2018).

What is becoming increasingly evident is that companies must adopt both a broad vision that includes the environment and society beyond the market – aligning internal organizational processes and organizational resources that generate value not only for corporate stakeholders but also for the environment and society –, and an orientation aimed at building long-term relationships with customers based on their ecological and social needs and values (Belz & Peattie, 2009). In fact, traditionally, organizations were seen as black boxes that consumed resources and made profits for shareholders; now, the focus is on sustainable value creation in the long run for all stakeholders in a way that contributes to a sustainable society (Chandler, 2016). According to Hart and Milstein (2003, p. 57), sustainable value is “strategies and practices that contribute to a more sustainable world while simultaneously driving shareholder value”. In such activities, businesses are called to balance two sources of creative tension: the temporal (short vs. long terms) and spatial (grow and protect internal organizational skills vs. new perspectives and knowledge from the outside).

In this environment, the value of integrity is also crucial because it is about efforts to engage stakeholders, align words and actions, and make business principles and practices adhere to sound moral and ethical principles. Integrity underlies good corporate citizenship and implies that companies adhere to constructive core values that underpin value-driven behaviors toward stakeholders and live up to high standards and principles (Waddock, 2001).

When the value of an organization's integrity – usually included in statements outlined in its mission – is rooted in its deep and superficial

layers, it shapes its culture and identity of heart and soul and can determine its success or failure (Giudici *et al.*, 2013). However, the integrity must be extended to encompass also the company's external context (social, environmental, and economic), showing its interconnections with sustainability since they both call for behaviors based on respect for social, economic, and environmental standards (Giudici *et al.*, 2013).

Moreover, recognising the close connection between a company's competitiveness and the well-being of its surrounding community, that is, the business concept of creating shared value, is paramount. According to Porter and Kramer (2011), businesses can create economic value and enhance their competitiveness through policies and practices that promote both social and economic conditions in the communities where they operate. Further, creating shared value is defined as "a strategic process through which corporations can solve a social problem which is relevant to its value chain while making economic profits" (Menghwar & Daoood, 2021, p. 467). To create shared value, businesses should offer products and services that address societal needs. It can enhance efficiency and generate social value by improving their supply chains, reducing waste, and adopting better environmental practices. Additionally, these efforts can lower costs and increase long-term profitability. Moreover, businesses can invest in education, infrastructure, and workforce development, benefiting both companies and the community.

Recent years have seen consumers' increasing engagement with ethical issues, and in the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic, a put into the forefront of ethical consciousness health issues and pro-social concerns (Hesse & Rundau, 2023). It is now well established that consumers increasingly use their consumption choices as a 'vote with the wallet' to award companies and brands considered seriously and honestly engaged in the integration of the creation of economic value with social and environmental sustainability (Becchetti & Salustri, 2019).

In this respect, for organizations, (i) sustainable value creation is a moral obligation and a unique opportunity to differentiate, innovate, reduce cost and risk, and enhance reputation, legitimacy, and competitiveness (Hart & Milstein, 2003, p. 57), and (ii) integrity building and maintenance is pivotal to survival, development, and success in the today market characterized by multiple ethical challenges.

In this scenario, a holistic, structured, and innovative marketing approach emerges: sustainable marketing, definable as "the marketing within, and supportive of, sustainable economic development" (van Dam & Apeldoorn, 1996, p. 46). Sustainable marketing is a macromarketing concept because it affects entire systems, such as institutions, value chains, or sectors (Belz & Peattie, 2009). Moreover, it is the strategic business approach that creates

customer value and seeks to build customer loyalty by (i) integrating environmental, social, and ethical considerations and values that consumers and businesses hold in common into their marketing efforts and (ii) contributing so to the well-being of the planet and society and a prosperous economy (Spychalska-Wojtkiewicz, 2020; Sujanska & Nadanyiova, 2023). In this framework, consumers expect sustainable marketing strategies from companies, as well as goods and services, that align with their values and satisfy their growing demand for morally, environmentally, and socially responsible alternatives (Park *et al.*, 2022).

The agri-food sector is experiencing a growing awareness and concern among stakeholders about the environmental, social, and ethical aspects of this production sector, which, actually, can translate into market opportunities for those companies that, by offering products that reassure and comfort the consumer, can differentiate themselves from competitors (Henchion *et al.*, 2017). When talking about agri-food goods, in addition to talking about “experience goods” or “trust goods” (concerning their quality), one must also remember they are also the outcome of a governance model organized on supply chains (long and/or short) and on territories from which a series of material and immaterial values created by the business arise, and business’s market positioning and social role is built. For this reason, the agri-food sector is under the lens of professionals, academics, and institutional managers in terms of analyzing its contributions to developing the environmental and social dimensions of sustainability.

With particular regard to the social dimension, it is often overlooked in studies on the sustainability of agri-food businesses (Massuça *et al.*, 2023), maybe because there is still no clear and universally shared definition, and it appears as an open, indefinite, and elusive concept (Allen *et al.*, 1991; Boström, 2012; Janker & Mann, 2020). In this uncertainty, anyhow, widespread consensus is found in the relevant indicators to be considered, divided into aspects inherent to the business community and society in general (Diazabakana *et al.*, 2014).

What emerges is that sustainable marketing is a concept gaining more and more importance (Gong *et al.*, 2023). However, it is still at an early stage of research (Park *et al.*, 2022), and there is a lack of studies investigating the role of the social indicators above within a sustainable marketing strategy of an agri-food company and the benefits or risks that this approach can generate within the overall business strategy.

This research arises from the desire to move away from the various contributions relating to the environmental dimension of sustainability in the agri-food sector. Specifically, this study aims to shed light on how the inclusion of the social dimension within sustainable marketing strategies could make what can be defined as “corporate philosophy” a competitive

strategic factor able to produce “distinctive qualities” that allow agri-food companies to pursue growth strategies successfully.

Those qualities (or competencies) are unique, superior, and strong attributes developed by an organization that (i) set it apart from competitors because no one else in the market is doing it, (ii) cannot be easily replicated, and (c) enable the organization to address market problems, satisfy customer needs and deliver value to its markets. Several benefits derive from them, including competitive advantage due to unique offerings that are tricky to replicate, improved value proposition (derived, i.e., from innovation, quality, or efficiency), diversification and expansion (by exploiting the strengths points), brand recognition, equity and customer loyalty (i.e., to build brand identity and equity thanks to the relation the business’ brand to its unique attributes by customers, in turn, build customers’ loyalty), resist to market changes, strategic focus (on areas with the greatest top-class perspective and value for customer).

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How can an agri-food company include the social dimension in its sustainable marketing strategy?

RQ2: What are the effects of this inclusion on the main stakeholders?

RQ3: What is the impact of this inclusion on achieving company objectives?

The qualitative, in-depth single case study methodology (Harrison *et al.*, 2017; Noor, 2008; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2017) was chosen to answer the research questions as (i) it was widely used in business, agriculture and the social sciences research, (ii) it is useful for deeply exploring complex issues from multiple perspectives, examining contemporary events, and (iii) it can be used to provide in-depth knowledge of complex phenomena (Crowe *et al.*, 2011).

This paper aims to provide an answer to these questions through the description of how a medium-sized dairy company located in a geographical area characterized by high limitations has integrated its social dimension within its business philosophy and how this integration is at the basis of its strategy of covering historical markets, commercial development in the Italian market and expansion towards foreign markets.

Section 1 describes the literature review on sustainable marketing and the social dimension in the agri-food business. Section 2 presents the methodology, the research setting, and the data source. Section 3 shows the single case study investigated. The conclusion and explanation of the implications of this study are included in Section 4.

1. Background

Sustainable marketing

Over time, marketing, in a context of ever greater consumer involvement, has evolved to adapt to society's evolution and its new requirements. There was a transition from the Product-centric era (Marketing 1.0), the Customer-oriented era (Marketing 2.0), to the Values-driven era (Marketing 3.0), and then to digital-centric marketing (Marketing 4.0) (even if we are already talking about marketing 5.0 - Kotler *et al.*, 2021). In this new era – which inevitably binds to the previous one – businesses are required to be more transparent in their marketing and communication processes since it is much easier now for consumers to make informed purchases, and it is not enough for businesses to reiterate their value proposition to keep it in consumers' mind, but they keep that promise; otherwise, they cannot achieve customer loyalty (Kotler *et al.*, 2016). As a result, business objectives are achieved by ensuring economic, environmental, and social sustainability, considering the long-term impacts of production and consumption. In other words, businesses should provide value to customers, ensuring society's and the consumer's well-being are preserved or improved: it is the shared value (which recognizes both economic and social needs, so also creating value for society) to define markets (Kotler *et al.*, 2016). Sustainable marketing is a broad marketing concept that includes environmental marketing, green marketing, and societal marketing (Trivedi *et al.*, 2018) and is essential for creating a sustainable company (Rudawska, 2018b).

Despite not being a novelty (Murphy, 2005), sustainable marketing is still in its infancy (Park *et al.*, 2022), although it is gaining more and more importance (Gong *et al.*, 2023).

Two twenty-year-old definitions of sustainable marketing appear particularly significant as they show two different perspectives, the first American with a more managerial approach and the other European with a broader viewpoint. According to Fuller (Fuller, 1999, p. 4) “sustainable marketing is defined as the process of planning, implementing, and controlling the development, pricing, promotion, and distribution of products in a manner that satisfies the following three criteria: (1) customer needs are met, (2) organizational goals are attained, and (3) the process is compatible with ecosystems”. European approach sees sustainable marketing as “the next natural step forward, with an emphasis on progress towards greater sustainability. It is a broader management concept which focuses on achieving the ‘triple bottom line’ through creating, producing and delivering continuously satisfying customers and other stakeholders” (Charter *et al.*, 2002, p. 12). Summarising, “Sustainable market orientation is connected with

the continuous process of environment analysis as well as the design and implementation of strategies that ensure sustained growth, consistent with the assumptions of sustainable development” (Rudawska, 2018b, p. 58).

Market orientation toward sustainability involves constant external expectations analysis and formulating and implementing strategies that pursue economic business performance compatible with sustainable development postulations (Rudawska, 2018b). It is essential to highlight that a marketing strategy of long-term success is a process that involves pairing the internal resources and capabilities of a business with external environmental opportunities (Day, 1994, 2014; Kozlenkova *et al.*, 2014; Kuwu & Gakure, 2014). The strategy implementation requires incorporating the sustainable development objectives into the organizational structure, and, as the concept of sustainable marketing should apply to the entire organization, it is necessary to look at the internal resources and capabilities to shape marketing strategies.

It is important to underline that some authors (Belz & Peattie, 2009; Quoquab *et al.*, 2021; Rudawska, 2018a) have made a difference between sustainable marketing and sustainability marketing. They argue that the first term refers to building long-term customer relationships without specifically referencing sustainability issues. In contrast, the second term relates more precisely and clearly to the sustainable development agenda and focuses on creating and maintaining sustainable relationships with customers, as well as the social and natural environments. It should be noted, however, that the two terms are used interchangeably in the literature due to the very thin difference between these two terminologies (B. Kumar, 2018; Quoquab *et al.*, 2021).

For the successful integration of the environmental and social dimensions into business strategy and consumers’ reassurance about the value deriving from the products of the company and the benefits of sustainable consumption, the company must include the values of sustainability within four fundamental strategies of marketing, that are innovation, collaboration, communication, and commitment (Obermiller *et al.*, 2008; Trivedi *et al.*, 2018).

While *innovations* in production processes imply significant investments, sustainable processes provide better returns and, together with sustainable packaging, distribution, and promotion, allow lower costs and increased efficiency (Martin & Schouten, 2012; Reutlinger, 2012).

Collaboration with other bodies/NGOs/organizations on sustainability issues positively benefits consumers’ purchasing decisions – which will value the business’ interest in local development issues and its sustainable investments for the territory – and also generates value for the environment and the company (Trivedi *et al.*, 2018).

The success of sustainable marketing and maintaining long-term relationships between a business and its stakeholders is closely connected to its *commitment* to the community's well-being and the empowerment of employees and other stakeholders (Emery, 2012; Lubin & Esty, 2010; Rondinelli, 2004). In this sense, the business will see added value recognized for its products, a premium price, the development of brand loyalty, a reduction in costs, and an improvement in efficiency and organizational performance (Oliveira & Sullivan, 2008; Reutlinger, 2012; Trivedi *et al.*, 2018).

Communication, intimately linked to the concept of business' longevity, allows it to provide transparent information about its sustainability performances and demonstrate its congruity with the new culture of sustainability (Drempetic *et al.*, 2020; Iannuzzi, 2017; Montero-Navarro *et al.*, 2021), playing a fundamental role in ensuring that it has a "license to operate" and building and consolidating reputational capital (Drempetic *et al.*, 2020; Lim & Greenwood, 2017; Schultz *et al.*, 2013).

The results of such strategies will create value for the organization, the environment, customers, and the community as a whole.

Social dimension in the agri-food business

The agri-food system, lying "at the center of a global nexus of social, environmental, and economic problems" (El Bilali, 2019, p. 354), holds enormous responsibilities in overcoming the challenges of sustainability and faces public demands and expectations change and clashing goals that pose complex dilemmas and trade-off (Testa *et al.*, 2022). In such a scenario, an integrated and holistic approach to sustainable agriculture and food systems is needed (United Nations, 2020). In fact, sustainable food systems must achieve positive outcomes in all three dimensions of sustainability, involving favorable environmental and economic impacts and more equitable distribution of benefits for society (FAO, 2018).

Even though sustainability encompasses a three-pillar conception, the social dimension in general and specifically in the food system suffers from being overlooked and sometimes ignored by literature (Massuça *et al.*, 2023; Whitelock, 2019). Although there are numerous contributions regarding the environmental impacts or environmental sustainability of agriculture, the number of studies on the social dimension is decidedly smaller (Ballet *et al.*, 2020; Orou Sannou *et al.*, 2023; Toussaint *et al.*, 2021), mainly focused on the reason for its integration into business practices and not on what it is based on in the agri-food sector (Sidhoum, 2018).

This is attributable to the lack of an integrated approach but also to the complexity of the very concept of social sustainability in the food industry,

leading to an ongoing discussion about what constitutes social sustainability (Toussaint *et al.*, 2022) and, in turn, to its still unclear definition (Ajmal *et al.*, 2018; Allen *et al.*, 1991). The social pillar is deemed the most arduous to explain due to its subjectivity and context-dependency, requiring a definition that is as inclusive of all potential aspects as possible, allowing the difficulties in interconnectivity among its scope, measurement, and information to be overcome (Toussaint *et al.*, 2022).

In effect, although previous literature on Agenda 2030 includes significant social sustainability implications of food systems (due to its direct or indirect effects, particularly on SDGs 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, and 17) and businesses are gradually incorporating social sustainability concerns, further research is required in the agribusiness sector (Massuça *et al.*, 2023; Parrilla-González & Ortega-Alonso, 2022). While literature is increasingly recognizing the need to measure the sustainability of the agri-food sector and the agricultural system in both European and international contexts (Castillo-Díaz *et al.*, 2023), the social impact measurement still remains a challenge also because of the complexity of stakeholders¹ (Kelley & Simmons, 2015).

Recent studies examined social sustainability often about working conditions, but the concept should extend to living conditions, human rights, having regard to communities and ethical issues, food security, and so on (Agyemang *et al.*, 2022; Massuça *et al.*, 2023; Zorzini *et al.*, 2015).

To address a key emerging research question concerning “How does agribusiness integrate social aspects into its management?” (Massuça *et al.*, 2023, p. 240), this study focuses on two significant factors in the agricultural context that previous literature generally agrees upon: the engagement on the business community and the society as whole (Diazabakana *et al.*, 2014; Lebacqz *et al.*, 2013; Sidhoum, 2018). The first is related to the well-being of employees, such as education, working conditions, including gender equality, and quality of life. The second encompasses three main groups: quality of rural areas, contribution to employment, and product responsibility. Specifically, we do not proceed to measure the impacts of the company’s operations in the aspects above, nor the level of integration between the three

1. It should be pointed out that companies have access to various tools that are crucial in helping them measure and disclose their impacts, some of which are mandatory depending on the size of the company, while others are optional. Notable tools include the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (Directive 2022/2464/EU) and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (Directive 2024/1760/EU), ISO standards – including SA 8000 for Social Accountability and ISO 15075:2024, which relates to the social life cycle assessment of products –, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) – a valuable resource for understanding and reporting on economic, environmental, and social business impacts –, and the Sustainability Balanced Scorecard (SBSC) which serves as a comprehensive measurement tool that helps companies assess their economic, environmental, and social performance.

dimensions of sustainability. Still, through an in-depth single case study, we bring out some points that describe how the social dimension of sustainability has been included in a business's sustainable marketing strategy.

2. Materials and methods

Methodology

Researchers and practitioners in fields such as public health, agriculture, education, psychology, and the social sciences have widely used case studies as a methodological approach, as it helps them gain a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena and retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of actual events (Rogers, 2003; Sellnow *et al.*, 2009; Yin, 2013). In effect, in situations where researchers have little control over events, posit “how” or “why” questions, and want to investigate current phenomena in real life, case studies appear to be the best-suited research strategy (Yin, 1981).

According to the cognitive objective of this study, the use of the qualitative in-depth single case study method (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2013) was appropriate as (i) it allows for investigation and understanding of complex problems in real-world contexts by using a multidimensional approach, (ii) it is advantageous when the objective is to understand a specific problem or situation in depth, and there is a significant amount of available information, (iii) it provides insights into successful managerial experiences offering concrete courses of action, and (iv) although there is more emphasis on the particulars of the cases than on their representativeness, which makes generalizing its results difficult, it offers significant theoretical propositions which can be tested in a broader quantitative study (Flick, 2009; Harrison *et al.*, 2017; Noor, 2008; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2017).

Research setting

The single case selection process involves four criteria: (i) location in a region characterized not only by strong geographical limitations but also by a low economy (low GDP per capita), (ii) long-standing company, (iii) medium or large-sized enterprises, and (iv) access to rich, substantial, and relevant data.

The first selection principle originates from the goal of providing an example of developing a successful marketing strategy in a region that faces substantial geographical limitations and has a low economy. This criterion compelled us to focus on southern Italy.

The second criterion led to choosing a company that should have been operational for no less than ten years. This choice comes from the fact that (i) sustainability is a long-term vision that involves the development of a strategy grounded in ethical and moral principles, (ii) marketing strategies deal with long-term marketing goals, and (iii) strategic plan has a lifespan of more than five years (Karam *et al.*, 2018; V. Kumar *et al.*, 2012; Yalo *et al.*, 2019).

The third criterion arises from the need to examine a company with a structure dedicated to the marketing function, usually present only in medium/large companies. The marketing department, which arises for planning and carrying out marketing activities, has become increasingly important and has a crucial role in making businesses successful because it supports corporate strategy (Kotler *et al.*, 2019), for example, making the company able to measure on the “mega-trends” shaking the market, rethinking its position or re-processing its value proposition closely. Moreover, in medium/larger companies, it is possible to have a sustainability department or internal dedicated figures who deal directly with its sustainability, developing and implementing strategies that enable them to achieve sustainability targets in environmental and social dimensions and report on them. Due to the presence of this department, specific sustainability issues are better integrated into the company’s strategies and daily operations. This integration enhances the credibility and importance of sustainability disclosure (Ruhnke & Gabriel, 2013).

The fourth criterion addressed the assertion that “the quality and credibility of your study starts with the data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 18). The company to investigate should allow satisfying the general rule of data trustworthiness to be achieved – understood as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) –, as well as explicitness, vividness (which involves the production of detailed and thick description), creativity, thoroughness (which indicates a phenomenon’ full exploration, that is, thorough data collection), congruence, and rich rigor, which implies careful attention to detail (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017; Whittemore *et al.*, 2001)

Among the possible companies that exhibit the previously mentioned characteristics, this study selected the Assegnatari Associati Arborea s.c.a.p.a. Società Benefit (3A SB), a company with unique features, which main is working over around 90% of the entire cow’s milk sector in a region insular, reflecting its roots in the territory. It is a cooperative that became one of the largest Italian production companies in the production of milk and its derivatives, and the principal promoter of the development of the territory where it is headquartered, Arborea, near Oristano (Sardinia, Italy) (Giudici *et al.*, 2013). The Cooperative dates back to 1956, competes in the regional and national markets, and has entered the Chinese market, has 162 Sardinian

producer members and four production sites, each characterized by different production and technologies. In 2020, it recorded a 10 million turnover increase since 2019. In 2022, it obtained revenues of 211 million euros (+11% vs. 2021) and a production of 211 million liters of milk, of which 195 million were destined for dairy production for consumption (189 million bovine, 5.7 million goat's milk, 0.8 million sheep's milk), and 16 million destined for the marketing of industrial raw milk. The 3A SB, in addition to looking at the economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability, has always had the social dimension at heart, as evidenced by the statement of its previous president: "The Arborea miracle is called work, seriousness, mutual respect. We are proud to hand over economic benefits to our children, but also social and ethical ones, and we are proud to have created a model based both on social and entrepreneurial rules" (Giudici *et al.*, 2013, p. 241). The 3A SB also has a sustainability department, and its commitment to the three dimensions of sustainability manifested itself in 2021 with the modification of its Statute, which has made it a benefit company.

Data source

To comply with the fourth criterion of the company selection, this study collected data from several sources to generate more robust results (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2013), that is, primary (semi-structured interviews with top management and members of the sustainability department²) and secondary (social networks, institutional website, scientific publications, internal reports, and impact report) data. Specifically, in May 2023, a meeting was held with members of the Sustainability Department – who, according to previous literature (Ali *et al.*, 2024; Corsi & Arru, 2021; Eccles *et al.*, 2014; Ruhnke & Gabriel, 2013), were deemed the most appropriate interlocutor for expounding the company's sustainability policies and their impacts at various levels – during which a semi-structured interview occurred. This

2. Eccles *et al.* (2014) found that sustainability-oriented companies are likely to have a separate board subcommittee responsible for overseeing sustainability. In point of fact, sustainability department is an attribute of the Sustainability governance policies and structures (Ali *et al.*, 2024), and within it, the skills and abilities of managers come together and are reconfigured to create new strategic value, incorporate sustainability into corporate strategic and operational planning, as well as pursue positive and sustainable performance, providing a genuine commitment to sustainability rather than a superficial interest driven solely by reputational concerns (Corsi & Arru, 2021; Eccles *et al.*, 2014; Ruhnke & Gabriel, 2013). The sustainability department is primarily responsible for developing, implementing, and monitoring sustainability strategies, and its main role is to create a systematic approach that reflects the organization's sustainability performance and boosts the disclosure of this information to achieve corporate objectives (Ali *et al.*, 2024).

meeting provided an opportunity to explore different aspects related to the declarations made in the 2023 impact report concerning 2022. Additionally, it addressed the organisation's sustainable value, integrity, and shared value.

3. Case study

To address the first research question, the following subsection will outline the Company's values of sustainability and integrity, and how it fosters the creation of shared value within its business approach. The subsequent four subparagraphs will focus on the relationships with the company's four categories of key stakeholders. The final two subsections will highlight how the Company answers to the research questions 2 and 3.

Sustainable value, integrity value, and shared value

The company embarked on the path of sustainability since its origins. The choice to be a cooperative, aimed at enhancing and pursuing the mutualistic purpose, has made it possible to achieve the inherent objectives of this social form, which, directly and indirectly, has a social and economic impact on shareholders and stakeholders. The Company aims to allow members to grow together, helping each other to obtain something that they otherwise could not achieve independently (such as better working conditions, better prices for services, and lower costs for the purchase of equipment and materials) by putting the well-being of members and people at the center and, thus, becoming an instrument of the development of local communities in the territories in which it operates.

Concerning the sustainable value creation, the Company has always tried to balance short-term objectives with medium/long-term ones, operating with the primary aim of "creating the conditions for maintaining sustainable and satisfactory economic results in the interest of the entire community and, in particular, of stakeholders [...], such as workers, customers, suppliers, members and non-members, financiers, creditors, public administration and civil society" (3A SD, 2023, p. 25). Moreover, through an outside-in strategic approach aimed at analyzing external market dynamics and an inside-out strategic approach focused on specific Company resources and capabilities (Frau & Cabiddu, 2016), the business has managed to preserve its position in its historical market over time, keeping its relationship and commitment with the territory, innovating its products and making responsible production its philosophy.

This Company is an organization, meaning a community of individuals who collaborate for defined objectives (Melé, 2003), since it was established by farmers with “the aim of transforming and marketing their product in an associated form, perfectly aware that to achieve satisfactory results they could not operate individually”. Its goals, however, are broader in scope and look at the performance as a whole, recognizing that economic, environmental, and social aspects are connected and essential to each other and setting measurable objectives that generate a positive, tangible impact for all stakeholders, as indicated in the new Statute.

The value of integrity of 3A SB is well evident in its mission and vision, which “guarantee the fair remuneration for farmers, preserving the territory of origin and offering high-quality products that meet the consumer preference” and “generate profitable and sustainable development with excellent products that give satisfaction and well-being to people and fair remunerate the milk of our farmers” (3A SD, 2024). Respect for ethical principles and adherence of the Company’s operations to its core values is guaranteed by the administration of the Cooperative, which consists of a group of members elected directly by all members that have the task of guiding the Company in compliance with the cooperative mission and vision and of generating well-being for all members, as well as for all stakeholders identified by the Statute. In carrying out his task, corporate governance ferried the Company in changing its statutes to integrate into its corporate goals, in addition to profit, to bring about benefits both for society and the environment and become a Benefit Corporation (in Italian Società Benefit)³. It is a new legal tool that provides solid bones for aligning

3. Italy was the first country in the European Union to introduce the Benefit Corporation into its corporate law through Law No. 208 on December 28, 2015 (Article 1, paragraphs 376 to 384, and Annexes 4-5). This law does not define the Benefit Corporation as a new type of company: it appears as a hybrid organization that pursues both profit and social objectives while operating in a responsible, sustainable, and transparent manner towards the community, the environment, and other stakeholders.

According to Bertarini (2016), a Benefit Company is a type of corporation that aims for economic efficiency and effectiveness while also focusing on generating positive societal outcomes. In essence, this type of company retains all the traditional characteristics of a corporation but is also legally bound to pursue social responsibilities. This means that, in addition to focusing on profits for shareholders, it must actively seek to promote the common benefit (Hiller, 2013).

In this context, “common benefit” refers to achieving positive outcomes or reducing negative impacts through economic activities. Common benefits should be specified in the company’s statutes and pursued through a management strategy that seeks to balance the members’ interests with the effects of the company’s activities on society.

The Benefit Company is required to maintain transparency regarding its commitments. Each year, it prepares a report on its efforts to achieve the common benefit, which is included

missions and creating value in the long term. Therefore, it manages the Company, pursuing the common benefit by considering the interests of shareholders and all stakeholders. This legal form makes an annual report mandatory to attach to the annual financial statement to report the overall social and environmental performance to all stakeholders. In this legal form (a traditional corporation with modified duties that mandate higher standards of purpose, accountability, and transparency), sustainability is an integral part of the corporate business model aimed at creating conditions favourable to social and environmental prosperity today and in the future.

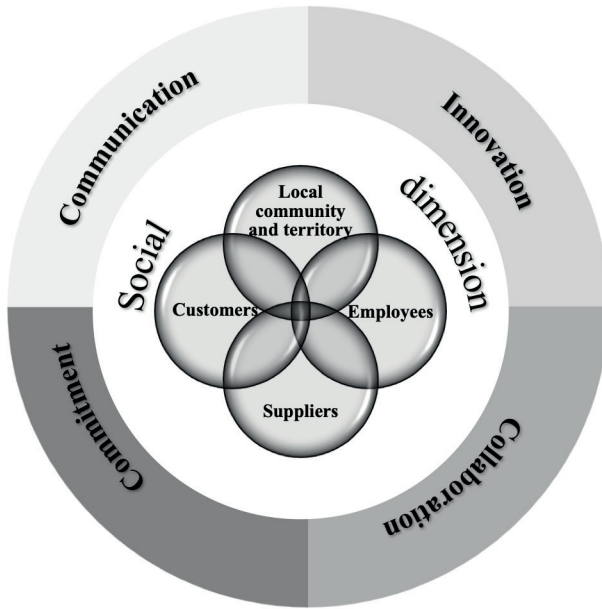
The Arborea SD indicates embracing shared value creation concept through its statements in the Annual Benefit Report 2022, declaring to operate to “satisfy the customer with an offer of quality products that respond to the need for modern, healthy, and balanced lifestyles, capable of creating a lasting relationship through the value of its brands. (This) has always been the pact of trust with which the Cooperative has built its growth and reputation in the market” (3A SD, 2023, p. 77). Furthermore, aware that the creation of shared value must also be seen from a value network perspective (Shafer *et al.*, 2005), 3A SB confirms its commitment to the creation of value along the entire supply chain, supporting it in its sustainability path, also by investing in control tools and the managerial and entrepreneurial growth of the various operators. In this regard, “There are many actions aimed at combating the phenomena of impoverishment of environmental characteristics, guaranteeing a fair income for economic actors, and fostering and intensifying social cohesion in the local community” (3A SD, 2023, p. 54).

Such evidence suggests that 3A SB’s business approach is characterized by a particular form of relationship with four categories of key stakeholders: the local community and territory, suppliers, employees and customers, towards which the Company directs its sustainable marketing strategies, as shown in the Figure 1.

in the company’s financial statements. The Antitrust authority is responsible for ensuring that the designation of the Benefit Company is not misused.

Companies that intend to transform themselves into Benefit Companies must modify their statute and transform into a Benefit Company.

Fig. 1 - Sustainable marketing strategies strived at key stakeholders



Local community and territory

Concerning this category of stakeholders, the Company is engaged in all four sustainable marketing strategies.

This kind of stakeholder highlights, inter alia, the Company's inside-out marketing strategy approach, that is, its focus on its specific internal resources and capabilities to shape its marketing strategies. We referring to its connection with the territory.

The Company's commitment manifests in different ways: it feels like a responsible citizen and invested with a crucial role in the development of its region. Therefore, 3A SB states in its first annual benefit report "a concrete commitment towards achieving the common well-being of the community" and "the goal of restoring value to the territory and generating new ones" (3A SD, 2023, p. 7). It underlines its very close relationship with the territory for over 60 years and being "placed in a typical context from an economic, political and social point of view" (3A SD, 2024) and its awareness that its actions can influence the territory and the entire community, especially considering the impacts that concern the whole dairy supply chain. For this reason, it "constantly adopts good practices for the protection of the territory because it is only by respecting the environment and animals that it can

guarantee a sustainable future for tomorrow's generations" (3A SD, 2024). In this regard, several activities have been carried out aimed at (i) rebalancing the agroecosystem in its main components to guide the strategies of the stakeholders present with a view to the circular economy, at combating the phenomena of impoverishment of environmental properties, (ii) guarantying a fair income for economic actors, and (iii) promoting and intensifying social cohesion in the territorial community. The way the Company calls itself, frequently simply "Arborea", also indicates this deep connection with the territory.

This constant attention and commitment to the community are the basis of its long collaboration with all the territory's actors and crucial role in establishing new norms, values, and forms of relationships, creating a shared common framework, and promoting regional development. The 3A states, "Our strength is cooperation, which is why we support educational projects and social activities that positively impact the territory" (3A SD, 2024). For this reason, it carried out several projects with non-profit organizations and institutions (including a pediatrics project, projects for nutritional education, active lifestyle, sport and music, projects aimed to intensify social cohesion in the local community and strengthen synergies with the local rural production systems of the entire territories⁴).

On the front of the innovations carried on by the Company to improve the conditions of the community and the territory, it is possible to include, but

4. Among the various projects promoted by the Company, we mention:

- "Food education in schools". For several years, the Company has collaborated with the world of schools and, under a regional school protocol, sends nutrition experts to primary school classes to talk to children about how they grow better by eating with awareness. It provides teachers and families with educational books on food education so that they can continue the path of knowledge autonomously and progressively.
- "Guided tours" is a project aimed at transmitting the passion that drives the Company in milk production. Every year, the Company welcomes schools and visitors by offering knowledge paths to discover the milk supply chain, starting from the farm and ending with a visit to the dairy.
- "Pediatrics project". It concerns a partnership with the Neonatal Pediatric Clinic of Cagliari that is particularly dear to the Company, which made available its laboratories to carry out specialist analyses on breast milk intended for premature babies so that it can be integrated and fortified in a targeted way in case of deficiencies.
- "Cagliari calcio". In addition to sponsoring Cagliari Calcio, the Company works closely with the Cagliari Calcio Fan School. It organizes co-marketing activities to illustrate to young athletes the benefits of physical activity and a correct and balanced diet.
- "Time in jazz". The Company supports "Time In Jazz", a week-long summer event that hosts internationally renowned musicians and music enthusiasts in Sardinia.
- "Kindness Days" concerns volunteering days carried out in collaboration with various Sardinian non-profit organizations. The Company's employees dedicate time and resources to projects ranging from assisting people with difficulty to dealing with the social fragilities afflicting local communities.

are not limited to, the adoption of new technologies for the optimization of nitrogen flows and the “pallet pooling” which led to the reduction of 249 t CO₂e, 20.3 tons of waste, and wood saved equal to 212 648 dm³ equivalent to 205 trees.

The territory and community elements have a preponderant character even in the Company’s external communication strategy. With the new national advertising campaign “The Gentle Revolution of Milk”, the Company aims to show and make its origins recognizable, somewhat undermining the stereotype of harsh and wild Sardinia: “There is an island that they haven’t told you about yet, a land as sweet as its milk”. The Company’s president states, “Our history is closely connected to the island’s territory, and the area that 100 years ago was unsuitable for cultivation and livestock now represents the most lush and productive territory in the region. Due to the unique qualities of the agri-food district, Arborea is one of the leading players in the Sardinian and national dairy market and (...) always respectful of the territory that hosts it. Ours is an island within an island, which unites diversity and becomes the bearer of a great inclusion project” (GDOWEEK, 2023).

Employment and working conditions

The Company declares its commitment to women’s full and effective participation in corporate life and the promotion of decent work and a safe and protected working environment, in line with SDGs 5 and 8 of the 2030 Agenda. The Company’s commitment toward its employees is stated in its Statute, which declares its “support of agricultural entrepreneurs and employees and their respective families”. This statement is accompanied by the numbers: 421 workers with permanent contracts, of which 45% of office workers are women; 14 years old is the average length of time an employee stays in the Company. The Company that obtains the voluntary certification UNI ISO 45001:2018 (Occupational Health and Safety Management System) is structured and organized with key employees capable of giving value to the Company product: they are aware of truly giving that added value to the products. Several are the 3A SD’s LinkedIn posts, where its employees declare that the “human dimension is an added value of Arborea, where there is a strong sense of belonging” and that “working at Arborea means embarking on a path of growth and continuous training”. Indeed, “Arborea represents the territorial identity and enhances the professional growth path of all its collaborators”. This commitment manifests itself in an organizational efficiency that the Company believes to be a source of competitive advantage.

The Company has estimated that 6.5 jobs are generated for each milk worker, 5.9 of which result from activating the supply chain and 0.6 from stimulating consumption. In other words, through Istat input-output tables, the Company estimates just under 2,700 indirect and induced employees for a value of 49.8 million euros. The 3A SD's commitment to other companies that turn around it is inherent in its corporate structure and is at the basis of its competitive advantage. But good relationships with companies inside and outside the supply chain are not just a desire to be "a good citizen" but also a strategy: the Company recognizes the ever-growing need for an integrated production chain capable of synchronizing and directly controlling all its phases to compete successfully on the markets.

Suppliers and members

The Cooperative has always aimed to enhance the dairy sector in Sardinia by acquiring members who represent approximately 90% of the entire Sardinian cow's milk sector, and it continues to grow thanks to the careful planning of the breeding and production phases.

The Company's objective is to obtain the best remuneration for milk for its members. The advertising campaign aimed at conveying the proper value of the dairy product, perhaps underestimated in past years, and at bringing out the proper consideration of the work behind that liter of milk should also be read in this sense.

The Company is highly committed to training its members in purely zootechnical, economic, and financial fields. It aims to build a sustainable supply chain in the triple economic, social, and environmental dimensions, and it knows that investing in the managerial and entrepreneurial growth of the people who work in livestock farms is necessary. The attention paid to breeders is one of the company's pillars, as it (i) allows it to present products on the market that communicate the typicality, history, and culture that distinguishes it, (ii) has enabled it to obtain the certification for Animal Welfare according to ClassyFarm for 100% of the stables of the contributing members, and in turn, (iii) to offer 100% of the Arborea brand milk and cheeses with this prestigious certification from 2023.

The aim of expanding the members' well-being also involves increasing the innovations introduced in their businesses, holding that the "*innovation allows you to better manage production both in terms of efficiency and sustainability*". The 3A SD supports its members with the "EcoStalla" project (a management system capable of supporting members in the traceability of the supply chain and generating economically helpful information for acquiring management control competencies to manage the breeding, stables

and land better), “Mitiga” project (to collect, categorize and correctly report the key data for the priority actions development, especially those necessary to address environmental critical issues promptly), “Climalat” project (for monitoring the impact of heat stress on both dairy cattle and corn crops), assistance for participation in energy efficiency tenders, among others. 3A SD believes that innovation in the management approach is important from the environmental sustainability perspective and contributes to improving animal welfare.

All innovations introduced in the members’ business helped to improve milk production in terms of quality and quantity and provided data on the reproductive animals’ tendencies. This has led to improving the economic sustainability of the members’ businesses, and consequently of 3A SD, and being able to continue investing in innovation. The dimension of social sustainability also benefits from introducing such innovations since the quality of work is improved and encourages the entry of new generations into local businesses. The end result is an increase in efficiency using the same production factors, consequently increasing the environmental sustainability of 3A SD.

Adopting the outside-in approach (aimed at meeting the needs of external stakeholders by providing value-added offerings, Frau *et al.*, 2020; Holmemo *et al.*, 2018; Schulz *et al.*, 2018), the Company has a monitoring program of the supply chain to capture changes that occur in suppliers (old and new) and distributors.

Customers and product responsibility

Concerning the customers, the 3A SD reveals its outside-in marketing strategy approach, monitoring both the health of the brand and customer needs and possible new market segments.

The demand-pull approach of the Company is evident, and several actions have been taken in response to new health, well-being, and sustainability consumption trends.

The Company – which has always aimed at the quality of its products, with constant internal laboratory analyses – has been awarded a series of certifications to guarantee its “responsible production” (ISO 22005, IFS, BRC, Halal, supply chain certification, animal welfare certifications).

About the new needs of consumers in terms of saving environmental resources, the Company has launched important projects:

- Production of fresh milk in bottles with 30% recycled plastic, with a project of further increase expected to 100% R-pet;

- Reduction in the weight of the yogurt jars, avoiding the use of 6 tons of plastic, and transition from polystyrene to polypropylene packaging, which entails a lower environmental impact during the production phase;
- Completely recyclable packaging for the A-Yo line;
- Zero waste project, a new trade policy aimed at minimizing food waste associated with commercial returns due to poor or limited shelf-life, enabled a 30% waste reduction (specifically, 50% milk, -51% cream, and -24% dairy).

Product innovations are also driven by consumer trends that the Company detects in the market. It is declared to be attentive and anticipative of consumer needs and to perform research and development activities that capitalize on product innovation. Looking to the past, just think about the kick-start for customers' changing habits in 1966, replacing the sale of loose milk with the sale in triangular cartons (technology push) due to the Company's powerful internal resources and capabilities to change the market, as well as the launch of a crude cow cheese when customers used to consume aged pecorino cheese, changing their tastes. In more recent times, it is possible to count:

- The offer of several lactose-free products to accommodate lactose-intolerance consumers;
- The use of microbial rennet in various productions to make them suitable for a vegetarian diet;
- The development of the A-Yo product, the first cow's and sheep's milk yogurt, which combines the flavor of traditional yogurt with the protein qualities of sheep's milk;
- The new pack for on-the-go consumption for the Kefir;
- A traceability system that allows the Company to improve the information flow efficiency between processes involved and to monitor and control all the parameters of the milk and related products (drinking milk or dairy products) to guarantee the final consumer.

The Company's aim of being responsible in its production manifests also in its willingness to contribute to goals 12.2-12-6 of Agenda 2030, besides goal 9.4, i.e., increasing efficiency in the use of resources by updating and modernizing its infrastructures and adopting more clean and environmentally friendly technologies. For example, through a circular economy project that transforms the livestock by-products into biogas (convertible into electricity and/or fuel and to power agricultural vehicles or vehicles of the Cooperative's milk collection fleet) and green composted fertilizer (usable as an alternative to chemical fertilizers of crops) reducing emissions, the energy costs of the Arborea plant and members' expenses for fertilizers.

This greater efficiency strategy, a core element of the inside-out approach (Carter *et al.*, 2011; Williamson, 1991), positively impacts the environmental and economic Company's sustainability dimensions.

The Company's strategic communication to its consumers is clear: to make known the genuineness of the Company's products, strengthen trust in the brand, convey the connection with the territory, a symbol of purity and sun, to evoke intangible attributes such as values and history of the land of origin and the link with the territorial brand.

In light of Brila's view (2019) on "regional ethnocentrism", this communication strategy is paramount, considering the significant group of consumers who highly value the food products of its region. According to the Author, the concept of "regional ethnocentrism" highlights the significance consumers place on products from their region compared to those from other areas, approaches the definitions of local food, as consuming local products supports the sustainable development of regions, and may be considered a pattern of sustainable consumption. For the regional ethnocentric consumer, brand trust and quality signs play a crucial role; moreover, he places the "local attribute" as a priority even over the "organic" attribute. Therefore, emphasizing the product's local origin and quality in marketing communications appeals to many consumers (Bryła, 2019).

In its latest advertising campaign, "The gentle revolution of milk", 3A SD aims to evolve "the image of the brand and its packaging without however distorting its identity. It enhances its origin and raw material and maintains the key elements of recognizability and uniqueness on the shelf" (3A SD, 2024). The advertising aims to promote the brand, grow awareness, and develop another product series.

Effects of inclusion of social dimension in its sustainable marketing strategy on the main stakeholders.

The 3A SD has developed a strong brand identity to convey its values and supply chain vision. In addition to being a leader in its region of origin, the Operations Director of Arborea also declares high loyalty to the brand in the rest of the Italian territory: "Hearing that our milk 'tastes like milk' is the most important recognition that the work of our partners and employees has received and continues to receive from the consumer. The seal on this recognition is the finding that our products in the Peninsula have the highest repurchase rate. Therefore, this confirms the relationship of loyalty that we manage to build with our consumers" (CLAL News, 2024). The Company's distinctive capabilities have allowed it to focus on the areas of greatest value, leading it to reduce its references by 50%. "This has allowed us to concentrate resources and energy in the lines with the highest added value, i.e., those which most of all embody the value of the supply chain and which, with the goodness of the raw material, allow us to consolidate and expand a relationship of trust with consumers who are looking for good, quality products" (CLAL News, 2024).

The Company notes that its long-standing relationship with its consumers, based on their trust in the quality of the products and the Company's values, relies on the great efforts made towards the social and environmental dimensions of sustainability, which are the basis of the quality of its products. Quality that consumer associations have attested: the laboratory research commissioned by the journal *Il Salvagente* at the Federico II University of Naples and Valencia decreed the full-cream Arborea milk as the best Italian milk without pesticides: "The product comes from healthy farms that have livestock's well-being at heart. Arborea milk is distinguished by the quite high quality and a unique taste, which makes it perfect even for the little ones" (Impact Report 2022); Altroconsumo (2024) has declared that 3A's white yogurt is the best, even if it is tied with Granarolo's Yogurt Cremoso Bianco Dolce, which, however, costs more.

Concerning the suppliers/members, they feel supported by the cooperative on various fronts: (i) social, with investments aimed at improving their entrepreneurial skills to support them in increasing productivity; (ii) environmental, given the investments in green innovations that create synergies between productive growth and saving of natural resources (as required by new European policies); (iii) economic, since the increase in the price paid for milk and the renewed industrial plan guarantee them a fair remuneration in the short term and positive outlook for the future, throwing away the thought of to give in to the lure of other national players.

The 3A SD's employees feel they can make a concrete contribution to the families that, for generations, have carried on the tradition of the dairy supply chain. The very low employee turnover evidences the sense of belonging to the business community and the sharing of values that structured training and professional growth paths foster. According to Lillis & Lane (2007), the attention to human resources and its constant enhancement has made them grow and become a key employee in the firm that put at the service of the company their skill and professionalism beyond a profound knowledge of the internal production dynamics.

The result is a very efficient organizational structure that allows constant growth without interruption, even during unpredictable external dynamics such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Impact Report 2022).

Impacts of inclusion of social dimension in its sustainable marketing strategy on Company objectives achievement

The case investigated shows how a Company operating in a rural context has strengthened and consolidated a first-rate role in its territory by integrating environmental and, inter alia, social dimensions into its values,

daily operations and medium-long term strategies. Including the social dimension in innovation, collaboration, communication, and commitment strategies has been the key to Company success. This inclusion is the basis of the Company philosophy, which has always allowed it to mediate the trade-off between short and long-term objectives.

Moreover, 3A SD shows the link between corporate identity, corporate image, and the organization's reputation. According to Zinkhan, Ganesh, Jaju, & Hayes (2001) and Westcott Alessandri (2001), the corporate identity, i.e., the way (ideal image) in which the organization decides to identify itself with all its audiences (that, when communicated, becomes a corporate brand), affects corporate image (the general impression of its audience), which, in turn, builds the organization's reputation over time, in a given context. The constant adherence to the Company's culture, values, and mission (crucial elements of the corporate brand - Maurya *et al.*, 2015) that have guided the Cooperative since its foundation can be interpreted as respect for the social pact between the Company and its stakeholders and being a "good citizen".

In particular, the Company's commitment was manifested along both categories of relevant social dimension indicators in the agri-food sector. It is precisely this match that has generated positive effects, mainly seen in the advantages derived from high social equity and brand loyalty which arising from trust in the quality of the Company's products. The value of social equity was fueled by the commitment and relationships established with the business community and society in general, particularly with local institutions and suppliers. The Company declares that its commitment to its suppliers is the basis of its success and that its social role in the territory is recognized as a value by the community and consumers. Furthermore, the attention towards employees allows for the creation of an efficient structure that permits it to compete successfully in the national market despite the objective limitations deriving from operating in an island context. The high brand equity results from constant attention to the authenticity and quality of the products and the recognition (at a regional level) of the contribution to territorial development deriving from the purchase of the Company's products.

All this happens in an unforeseeable market upstream and subject to promotional pressures downstream. The milk market is sometimes governed by speculative pressures, sometimes dominated by the shocks of an evolving production system, which, on the one hand, sees producers' solid conviction in pursuing the production efforts and, on the other, is stimulated by the propensity to invest in terms of prospective improvement. In addition, the decline in consumption has not supported the recognition of the great value of the raw material, milk, and, therefore, the entire supply chain, which guarantees quality to the final consumer (CLAL News, 2024).

The economic results are clear: third national player in the milk market, immediately after Granarolo. The operations director indicates continued growth in results for 2023: a turnover of almost 233 million euros, 191.8 million liters of milk processed, payout to members €0.625/lit, an export share equal to 5% of the turnover, and the aim of establishing new positions in Asia, Europe and North America (CLAL News, 2024).

The impact of the Company's implemented strategies becomes even more apparent when we compare the above data with national and European averages. According to ISMEA, the average price of raw milk at the farm gate in Italy in 2023 is €0.529/lit (2024b). In comparison, the average prices are €0.461 per liter in France and €0.523 per liter in Germany (ISMEA, 2024a). Additionally, the milk market observatory of the European Commission (2024) reports an average EU price of €0.469/lit for 2023.

4. Conclusions

In a moment of strong questions about the prospects and trajectories of the agri-food industry, this research shows how sustainable value creation in the long run for all stakeholders to contribute to a sustainable society and the organization's integrity values can be the keys to the company's success in its markets since it traces the course between short and long terms challenges, and protection of the status quo and growth driven by demand and technology push.

The inclusion of the social dimension in sustainable marketing strategies has allowed the 3A SD over time to accumulate distinctive competencies that have allowed it to compete and grow in a fickle and unpredictable market and be ready to respond to new consumer needs and trends, also concerning their expect of sustainable marketing strategies from companies.

The 3A SD understood that not only did it have to act to satisfy its mutual purpose of the cooperative best, but also provide value to all its stakeholders through strategies aimed at creating a recognized value that translated into benefits for consumers (quality products) for members (fair payment for milk and funds for investments in innovation) for the territory that supports the entire supply chain.

This single case study demonstrates how the sustainable marketing strategy carried out by a company focuses on generating value for all stakeholders and the territory in general, and embodied in the corporate identity and become a corporate brand has found confirmation in the corporate image, which ultimately manifests itself in the corporate reputation, proven by the evident growth in turnover and repurchase rate of products outside the Sardinian region. Respect for the company's "social pact" with the territory is the basis

of its ability to expand, from which, in turn, further benefits derive for the different stakeholders.

This study offers several contributions to policy, academics, and practitioners.

From the theoretical perspective, this paper confirms previous studies (e.g., Jung *et al.*, 2020; Rastogi *et al.*, 2024; Vafaei *et al.*, 2019) that found connection between sustainable marketing strategies and customer satisfaction and loyalty and see sustainability marketing as a strategic tool that allows companies to achieve sustainability in their production and commercial processes, well as exerts crucial influence on their reputation (Puma-Flores & Rosa-Díaz, 2024).

This research also provides some practical implications. First, it suggests that the success of the Company derives from the fact that sustainable marketing paid off only because it is part of the strategy that guides all the Company's actions (and not just for sales or product development, for example) and of its mission (Park *et al.*, 2022). This study also leads to the belief that sustainable marketing strategies allow high employee retention, the satisfaction of cooperative members, and compliance with external rules and new customer requirements. Moreover, it is evident that all four strategies were essential in achieving company goals: collaboration with third parties (i.e., trade associations, research bodies, etc.) to exploit external opportunities, communication towards all its audiences to disclosure and consolidate its values and image, generating a high social capital, and finally, the 360-degree innovations that have allowed it to increase efficiency and compete successfully in increasingly larger markets. In other words, this study highlights how sustainable marketing adoption can be crucial not only to meet societal expectations but also to achieve long-term success (Rastogi *et al.*, 2024).

The effects of including the social dimension in the sustainable marketing strategies of an agri-food company detected in this single case study do not claim to be generalized because of the subjectivity and context-dependence of the social dimension (Toussaint *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, limits arise from using a single case study that restricts the transferability of findings to every kind of business case. However, this is not a proper limitation; it is the expected consequence of the first understanding of a complex phenomenon from multiple perspectives and a structured starting point for further investigations.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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Brunella Arru

University of Bari Aldo Moro, Italy
Via Amendola 165/A, 70126, Bari, Italy
E-mail: brarru@uniss.it

She holds a degree in Economics and Business (Sassari, 2004) and a PhD in Law and Economics of Production Systems (Sassari, 2014). She is research fellow in Agricultural Economics and Policy. Her current research interests include sustainable development, sustainable entrepreneurship, rural development, and circular economy.

Roberto Furesi

University of Sassari, Italy
Piazza Università 21, Sassari, Italy
E-mail: rfuresi@uniss.it

He holds a degree in Agricultural Sciences (Sassari, 1987). He is Full Professor in Agricultural Economics and Rural Appraisal at University of Sassari from 2001. Current research interests include rural development, dairy sector economics, economic issues of aquaculture.

Pietro Pulina

University of Sassari, Italy
Piazza Università 21, Sassari, Italy
E-mail: ppulina@uniss.it

He holds a degree in Agricultural Sciences. He is Full Professor of Agricultural Economics and Policy since 2005. Current research interests include farm economics and management, food supply chain organization, agricultural policy, food production ethics and sustainability.

Fabio A. Madau

University of Sassari, Italy
Piazza Università 21, Sassari, Italy
E-mail: famadau@uniss.it

He holds a degree in Agricultural Sciences (1998) and a PhD in Agricultural Economics and Policy (2001). He is Associate Professor of Agricultural Economics and Policy. Current research interests include farm economics, productivity and efficiency analysis, fisheries economics and policy, and agricultural policy.