

Breaking the chains of agro-mafia exploitation: a collaborative approach to support migrant workers in Paternò, Sicily

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Introduction

Labour exploitation in agriculture has emerged as a persistent and highly contentious public problem within contemporary agri-food systems. In Italy, this phenomenon – commonly referred to as *caporalato* – disproportionately affects migrant workers, whose vulnerability is produced by the interplay of precarious legal status, housing deprivation, transport dependency, and limited access to welfare

services. Despite growing public attention and repeated policy interventions, exploitative labour regimes continue to reproduce themselves across territories. This persistence reveals the structural limits of responses centred primarily on repression, emergency measures, or short-term projects.

This paper explores labour exploitation in agriculture (caporalato) as a structural feature of contemporary agri-food systems, sustained by migrant labour, housing precarity and unequal power relations along food supply chains. Focusing on Paternò (Sicily) – a context characterised by long-standing exploitation and institutional fragility – the study analyses the Break Free! project

as a policy-oriented experiment aimed at reconfiguring public action beyond emergency and enforcement-based responses. Adopting a practice-based approach, the paper conceptualises the project as part of a longer trajectory of civic institution-building led by the Participatory Presidium of the Simeto River Agreement. Through the analysis of proximity help desks, multi-actor coordination and institutional mediation practices, the paper shows how organised civil society can operate as an intermediary policy actor, translating lived experiences of exploitation into policy-relevant knowledge and fostering coproduction in policymaking. The findings highlight both the potential of civic coalitions to stimulate public innovation in weak governance contexts and the limits of project-based interventions in the absence of stable, integrated policy frameworks.

Consequently, effective responses to labour exploitation require forms of public action capable of connecting fragmented institutional responsibilities, situated knowledge, and territorial infrastructures. However, the institutional conditions through which such connections are produced remain inherently unstable, particularly in local contexts characterised by weak administrative capacity, informality, and

discontinuous public intervention. Against this background, policy-oriented and critical scholarship has called for integrated approaches capable of linking labour regulation with housing, mobility and social services. However, less attention has been paid to the institutional processes through which such integration is built and stabilised, especially in contexts where public responsibilities are fragmented across policy sectors and governance levels. In these settings, civil society actors often become crucial intermediaries between situated needs and institutional responses. Yet their role in shaping durable public policies beyond service provision, advocacy or emergency intervention remains under-examined.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the *Break Free! – Breaking the Chains of Exploitation* experience in Paternò (Sicily). Rather than treating *Break Free!* as a self-contained project, the paper conceptualises it as a policy-oriented experiment embedded within a longer trajectory of civic action and institutional engagement. Implemented over a limited time span, *Break Free!* functioned as a moment of testing, consolidation and learning within an ongoing process through which a civic coalition—the Participatory Presidium of the Simeto River Agreement—has progressively built organisational capacity, policy expertise and institutional legitimacy.

The analysis is explicitly situated within debates on instituting civics and civic institu-

tions. Civic action is approached as a process of institution-building from below, through which norms, routines, expertise and forms of public authority are gradually stabilised. From this perspective, *Break Free!* is understood not as an endpoint, but as one phase in a long-term civic trajectory, enabling the translation of accumulated knowledge and relationships into concrete policy experimentation aimed at influencing governance arrangements.

Empirically, the paper focuses on a territory marked by strong dependence on migrant agricultural labour, where migrant workers experience chronic housing precarity and an institutional context in crisis, culminating in the dissolution of the municipal administration due to mafia infiltration. Analytically, it contributes to debates on civic institutions by showing how long-term civic trajectories can generate temporary yet strategic moments of experimentation, through which organised civil society acts as an intermediary institution, fosters policy learning and partially reconfigures public action while also revealing the limits of project-based solutions in the absence of stable public capacity.

Caporalato, labour exploitation and fragmented governance: insights from existing literature

Recent scholarship increasingly conceptualises the phenomenon of agro-mafias and the exploitation of agricultural workers not as an ex-

ceptional or residual pathology, but as a structural mechanism of labour intermediation and control embedded in contemporary agri-food systems. In Italy, the phenomenon commonly referred to as *caporalato* – the illegal intermediation and exploitation of agricultural labour – disproportionately affects migrant workers whose vulnerability is deeply embedded within the globalised political economy of agri-food systems, migrant labour regimes, and territorial governance (Leogrande, 2016; Laneve, 2019; Pettinelli, 2022; Taschini, 2022). A prominent body of literature situates *caporalato* within the asymmetric power dynamics governing contemporary agri-food value chains. Critical political economy perspectives show how the concentration of power among food processors and large-scale retailers places downward pressure on agricultural prices and producer margins (Pettinelli, 2022). These pressures are often externalised onto labour, fostering informal intermediation, wage compression and systemic exploitation. From a labour law perspective, this dynamic intersects with contractual discontinuity, precarity and weak enforcement, producing widespread working poverty in the agricultural sector (Faleri, 2019). Migrant agricultural workers are disproportionately affected by these structural vulnerabilities. Seasonal employment, restrictive migration regimes and precarious legal status intersect to intensify their socio-economic marginalisation and to restrict access

to welfare protections, health care and legal assistance (Caxaj et al., 2023). Exploitation is therefore sustained not merely by economic dependency, but by asymmetrical power relations and socio-legal constraints that weaken workers' capacity to resist, claim rights and engage in collective organisation (Omizzolo, 2019). In Italy, the institutional response to *caporalato* has largely been centred on criminal law, particularly following the adoption of Law 199/2016. Although legal literature acknowledges the symbolic, normative and deterrent value of this framework, critical assessments point to its structural limitations. By operating primarily ex post and requiring high evidentiary thresholds, criminal law remains poorly equipped to address the socio-economic and territorial conditions that reproduce workers' vulnerability, including housing deprivation, transport dependency, legal precarity and limited access to welfare protections (Taschini, 2022). Alongside legal and economic analyses, spatial planning and territorial studies have increasingly framed *caporalato* as a phenomenon embedded in specific spatial configurations and local governance arrangements. Critical planning literature has examined informal migrant farmworker settlements and ghettos, particularly in Southern Italy, not as exceptional or residual spaces, but as territorial formations produced at the intersection of agricultural restructuring, market pressures, migration governance and housing exclusion.

Drawing on Southern urbanism and informality studies, these contributions stress the ambivalent character of such settlements, which function simultaneously as spaces of marginalisation, exposure and segregation, and as infrastructures of survival, sociality and everyday economic organisation (Tarsi, Vecchiarelli, 2021). This perspective also unsettles any neutral understanding of planning. Public interventions aimed at the 'overcoming' or removal of informal settlements often reproduce technocratic and depoliticising approaches, in which the settlement is framed primarily as a spatial problem to be solved through relocation, containment or temporary accommodation. Such interventions tend to prioritise short-term spatial fixes – including segregated camps, prefabricated units and modular housing solutions financed through emergency funds – while leaving in the background the labour, welfare, housing and migration regimes that reproduce exploitation over time (Boano et al., 2025).

Urban and territorial policy studies add a further layer to this debate by examining the material organisation of local welfare systems. Research emerging from the CapaCityMetro project conceptualises welfare spaces not as neutral containers of services, but as concrete sites where rights, access and citizenship are materially enacted, negotiated or denied (Marconi, Cancellieri, 2022). From this perspective, local policies addressing migration,

labour inclusion and social protection appear as fragmented archipelagos of temporary, project-based and weakly coordinated interventions. The interaction between public institutions, third-sector organisations and volunteers therefore reveals not only the plurality of actors involved in the governance of migrant labour, but also the institutional fragility and discretionary practices through which such governance is materially organised. Building on these insights, this paper examines how *anti-caporalato* responses are constructed within situated governance contexts, focusing on the relational processes through which civic actors and public institutions define problems, produce policy-relevant knowledge and negotiate responsibilities across fragmented and fragile institutional arenas. The article addresses this analytical space by analysing *anti-caporalato* initiatives as empirical sites in which the relationship between civic action and public institutions can be observed beyond the binary opposition between collaboration and conflict and how civic-led *anti-caporalato* initiatives contribute to the coproduction of public action in a highly contentious policy field.

A theoretical framework for civic-led experimentation

The analytical framework of this paper draws on recent debates in urban studies and planning that question dichotomous interpretations of the relationship between civic action

and public institutions. These debates move beyond the bottom-up/top-down divide, framing public action as a relational and contested process shaped by institutional and civic actors, situated knowledge and uneven power relations (Cellamare, Ostanel, 2024). Within this debate, scholars have emphasised the capacity of civic practices to generate public goods, address collective problems and open spaces for institutional innovation (Healey, 2004; Cagnetti et al., 2004; Vitale, 2007). The notion of self-organised urban practices is particularly relevant here, as it shifts attention from the formal allocation of public responsibilities to the situated processes through which public problems, knowledge and responses are constructed (Cellamare, 2018). This perspective requires rethinking the categories through which state-society relations are interpreted. De Leonardis' reflection on 'third places' provides a useful lens for analysing the intermediate spaces in which civic initiatives encounter public powers and contribute to the production of public value (De Leonardis, 2024). Her work invites us to move beyond oppositions such as movements versus institutions, autonomy versus institutionalisation, or conflict versus collaboration. These encounters do not necessarily lead either to open confrontation or to absorption into existing institutional arrangements. Rather, they constitute provisional and contested arenas in which cooperation, pressure, negotiation and mutual learning may

coexist. In this sense, collaboration cannot be automatically equated with depoliticisation, nor can conflict be understood as external to policy-making. De Leonardis also unsettles the distinction between 'top' and 'bottom', showing that public institutions are themselves fragmented and internally differentiated, while civic initiatives may generate forms of voice capable of moving across institutional scales and challenging the boundaries of public responsibility (De Leonardis, 2001; 2025).

This understanding of state-society relations also raise the question of how public problems, responses and institutional responsibilities are produced and revised within such hybrid spaces of interaction. The debate on experimental governance is useful here because it conceptualises public action as an iterative process of situated learning, testing and revision. As Morgan (2018) argues, the experimentalist turn responds to the limits of command-and-control models in contexts marked by uncertainty, complexity and territorial inequality. Drawing on Dewey's democratic pragmatism and Sabel's work on experimentalism, policies are understood as provisional hypotheses to be tested, monitored and revised through recursive learning processes (Dewey, 1927; Sabel, Zeitlin, 2012; Morgan, 2018). However, institutional learning cannot be assumed as automatic, particularly where bureaucratic inertia, political self-preservation and uneven administrative capacities shape the conditions

under which experimentation occurs (Gilardi, Radaelli, 2012; Marques, Morgan, 2018). For this reason, this paper approaches experimentation not as a neutral problem-solving device, but as a politically situated process. Savini and Bertolini's notion of urban experimentation as a 'politics of niches' is central in this respect, as it shows that experimental niches are not inherently transformative spaces: their trajectories depend on how they are recognised, translated, supported, marginalised or absorbed within dominant institutional regimes (Savini, Bertolini, 2019). Through this framework, *anti-caporalato* initiatives are examined as empirical sites in which the relationship between civic action and public institutions cannot be reduced either to collaboration or to conflict. They offer a lens for analysing how civic actors engage with institutions while also contesting their inadequacies and contributing to the provisional construction of public responses.

Methodology

In response to the gaps identified in the literature—particularly the limited attention to institutional processes, policy construction and the relational dynamics between public institutions and civil society—this paper adopts a practice-based methodological approach. Drawing on practice-based perspectives on planning and institutional action (Crosta, 1998; Gherardi, 2019), collaborative policymaking is understood not as a formalised model

The informal settlement of Ciappe Bianche, Paternò (Sicily)

Source: Presidio Archive

Fig. 1

or a set of predefined arrangements, but as a processual and relational phenomenon enacted through situated practices that are simultaneously cognitive, material and normative. This approach is particularly suited to contexts characterised by informality, institutional fragmentation and conflict, such as those associated with labour exploitation in agriculture. Rather than focusing on policy outputs or formal governance structures, a practice-based perspective allows the analysis to follow how public action is produced in everyday interactions, through intermediary devices, routines and arenas where responsibilities, meanings and problem definitions are negotiated.

The case of Paternò, in Sicily, was selected as a context in which *caporalato*, housing precarity and institutional fragility intersect with a coalition-based response involving civil society actors and public administrations. The analysis focuses on the implementation phase of the Break Free! project, carried out between September 2024 and September 2025, and examines proximity help desks, coordination meetings and multi-actor meetings as situated practices through which policy knowledge was produced, contested and partially stabilised. A central methodological issue concerns the positionality of the authors. All of them were involved, in the Participatory Presidium and in the Break Free! project: one author served as president of the Participatory Presidium, while two authors held management and coordination roles within the project. This

embedded position provided access to informal negotiations, operational adjustments, institutional frictions and the relational work through which proximity-based support, advocacy and institutional engagement were connected. At the same time, embeddedness is not treated as an analytical privilege, but as a methodological condition requiring explicit reflexive treatment. Following Tedesco's reflection on situated experience and reflexive reconstruction, the process analysed here was not originally designed as a research setting (Tedesco, 2023). Its primary orientation was practical: responding to concrete situations of exploitation and vulnerability. Analytical reflection emerged subsequently, through a retrospective reconstruction of the process. To support analytical consistency and limit the risks associated with the authors' embedded position, the empirical materials were analysed through a staged and comparative procedure. First, project documents, reports, meeting minutes and coordination notes were used to reconstruct a chronological account of the implementation process, identifying key phases, turning points and moments of institutional interaction. Second, the materials were coded thematically around the main analytical dimensions derived from the conceptual framework: problem definition, production of situated knowledge, negotiation of responsibilities, forms of collaboration and conflict, and institutional responses.



Labour exploitation, institutional inertia and territorial responses in Paternò (Sicily).

The case discussed in the paper focuses on the municipality of Paternò, located in the Simeto Valley in eastern Sicily, an area characterised by a strong agricultural vocation and a structural dependence on migrant seasonal labour. Over the last decade, Paternò has increasingly become a destination for young migrant workers employed in the citrus and horticultural sectors, while simultaneously emerging as a site where labour exploitation, housing precarity and institutional fragility intersect in particularly acute ways (fig.1).

Data collected from the register of the social canteen *Bisaccia del Pellegrino* show that, from 2016 onwards—and with a marked acceleration after 2020—the number of meals provided to

migrants increased significantly. This trend culminated in January 2023, when approximately 3,500 lunches were served to migrants in a single month.

The population is predominantly composed of young men of Maghrebi origin, mainly Moroccan and Tunisian nationals aged between 18 and 35. Many are either applicants for international protection or people without a valid residence permit, a condition produced by long and opaque administrative procedures, limited access to legal information and structural barriers in navigating regularisation pathways. Legal precariousness, in turn, functions as a key driver of vulnerability to labour exploitation. The local labour market is characterised by the widespread presence of informal recruitment systems managed by illegal



Proximity outreach desk at Bisaccia del Pellegrino

Fig. 2

intermediaries (*caporali*), who organise daily selection and transportation of workers from gathering points within the city towards agricultural fields in the surrounding countryside. Work is commonly paid on a piece-rate basis, with extremely low remuneration that imposes physically exhausting rhythms merely to ensure subsistence. These labour conditions are inseparable from severe housing deprivation: migrants are frequently forced to live in informal settlements, abandoned buildings or makeshift shelters lacking basic services such as water, sanitation and electricity. The absence of adequate housing not only exacerbates physical and psychological vulnerability, but also directly undermines access to residence registration, healthcare, banking services and regular employment, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and exploitation.

Over the years, local civil society organisations have progressively stepped in to compensate for these gaps, providing essential services such as food distribution, access to showers

and laundry facilities. While these forms of civic action have been crucial in responding to what can be described as structural emergency conditions, institutional responses have been largely absent or limited to sporadic and reactive measures. Public interventions have mainly taken the form of temporary and reactive measures—such as evacuation orders or short-term containment strategies—without addressing the structural drivers of exploitation and marginalisation. Although civic initiatives have enabled day-to-day survival and mitigated the most acute consequences of exclusion, they have not, on their own, been able to trigger lasting or transformative processes over time. This chronic condition of unresolved vulnerability has been further compounded by serious criminal incidents, including the murder of a farmworker in February 2024, which starkly exposed the human cost of policy inaction and the persistence of exploitative labour regimes. This structural marginalisation unfolds within a context of profound institu-

tional fragility. The municipality of Paternò was dissolved in December 2025 following judicial investigations into mafia infiltration, a measure that did not simply interrupt ordinary administrative functions but intensified an already existing condition of institutional inertia. The dissolution weakened the capacity of local government to coordinate social policies, address labour exploitation and engage in long-term policymaking around housing, welfare and inclusion. Crucially, this institutional rupture occurred at a moment when some entrenched dynamics of fragmentation and disengagement were beginning—albeit tentatively—to be challenged through emerging forms of territorial cooperation, despite limited resources and persistent institutional uncertainty.

Break Free! Break the chain of exploitation

It is within this fragile and contested governance landscape that *Break Free! – Breaking the Chains of Exploitation* was implemented. The project, funded by ActionAid Italy, was designed to mobilise resources and pilot an integrated policy-oriented response to labour exploitation and *caporalato* in Paternò. Implemented over 13 months (September 2024–October 2025), the project was carried out by a composite consortium led by Presidio Partecipativo del Patto di Fiume Simeto (together with the Bio-District of the Simeto Valley, APAS, FLAI CGIL Catania, Sicilian Region, the latter two participating as non-funded part-

ners). *Break Free!* built upon a long-standing trajectory of community-based activism and public policy engagement that, since 2015, had led to the establishment of the Participatory Presidium as a civic actor operating in the intermediate space between citizens and institutions. Through sustained involvement in territorial governance processes and regional policy-making – most notably during the drafting of the Sicilian regional law on migration and inclusion (2018–2020) – the Presidium progressively consolidated technical and legal expertise, institutional relationships and political legitimacy. In this sense, *Break Free!* represents the operationalisation of a pre-existing civic policy infrastructure, aimed at translating accumulated capacity into concrete policy experimentation at local and regional levels. The project's core action was the establishment of a proximity outreach desk for the prevention and contrast of labour exploitation, launched in October 2024 and expanded to two weekly openings from February 2025. The desk was strategically located within the social canteen La Bisaccia del Pellegrino, enabling direct contact with a highly vulnerable population while offering a safe and trusted space for confidential consultations. The service was delivered by a multidisciplinary team comprising a legal expert, a social-health worker, two cultural mediators, and a psychologist (fig.2). Over 90 beneficiaries accessed socio-legal and health-related support, particularly for document verification and regularisation, as



A public meeting moment at the Ex Macello

Fig. 3

Plenary public discussion between regional officials and the local community.

Source: Presidio Archive

Fig. 4

well as accompaniment to local institutions for essential administrative procedures. Eleven individuals were referred to the regional *anti-caporalato* help desk, and four initiated formal reporting procedures. Recognising urgent material needs, the project also distributed hygiene kits and basic work tools. After the formal project period ended in May 2025, partners chose to maintain the desk on a voluntary basis, reaching an additional ten beneficiaries—demonstrating both the demand for and trust in the service.

A second pillar focused on facilitating access to regular employment. Initial scouting within the Bio-District of the Simeto Valley, partner of the project, revealed limited opportunities due to the predominance of small, family-run farms. The strategy was therefore expanded to include larger agricultural enterprises, leading to a stable collaboration with one company and the activation of eight regular employ-

ment contracts, four of which were sustained over time. This experience highlighted critical structural barriers, particularly housing and transport. The lack of adequate accommodation forced workers to rely on external services (canteens, showers), often conflicting with work schedules. In response, the partner company introduced corrective measures, including on-site shower facilities and flexible working hours. Transport shortages were addressed through the temporary hiring of a driver—an effective but financially unsustainable solution without institutional support. Cultural and social factors also emerged, including high mobility within migrant communities and a preference among some workers for informal arrangements perceived as more flexible. These dynamics underscored that access to regular employment alone is insufficient without broader structural interventions.

The Community Policies action represented



the core of the project, aiming to translate experimental interventions into more durable policy arrangements. Key outcomes included the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the Sicilian Region, which formally recognised the project as part of the local support network for the regional *anti-caporalato* help desk. Within this framework, the project team accompanied five migrant workers through formal reporting procedures concerning conditions of labour exploitation. The project also provided a situated opportunity to consolidate and strengthen the project partnership with La Bisaccia del Pellegrino, the social canteen that represents a key point of reference for the population living in and around Ciappe Bianche, as well as to establish structured collaborations with Penelope and Centro Astalli Catania. These civil society organisations operate at the metropolitan scale and manage the Polo Sociale Integrato, funded by the Sicilian Region through the Su.Pre.Me programme. These alliances reinforced the project's capacity to operate across welfare, legal support and advocacy domains, while anchoring local action within broader regional infrastructures. A central dimension of the Community Policies action was the deliberate effort to 'care for'

and stabilise relationships between regional and local institutions. From the perspective of the civic organisation leading the project, this involved sustained trust-building with regional public officials, developed through continuous reporting, regular exchanges and transparency regarding on-the-ground activities. Alongside this cooperative dimension, the project team exercised constant solicitation towards the local administration through emails and direct contacts, explicitly requesting updates, clarifications and follow-up actions (fig.3). This persistent engagement aimed to keep institutional attention active over time, preventing interactions from remaining merely episodic or symbolic. While the project did not lead to consolidated or formalised public policies, it contributed to a gradual shift in the attitude of the local administration over the course of the project. In its initial phases, institutional participation in public meetings was limited and largely symbolic, often restricted to the presence of a single councillor who struggled to respond substantively to the observations raised by participants (fig.4). Over time, however, institutional engagement increased, culminating in the participation of the entire municipal executive in the public event held in May 2025.

This change signalled a growing recognition of the issue and a renewed interest in exploring concrete initiatives, particularly about housing conditions for migrant workers. This evolving dynamic suggested the tentative opening of a political space for more structured institutional engagement. However, it did not translate into tangible policy outcomes and was ultimately disrupted by external political factors. The dissolution of the municipal administration due to mafia infiltration abruptly interrupted the process, halting the emerging momentum and underscoring the structural fragility of local governance contexts in which civic-led policy experimentation takes place. This interruption highlights both the limits of project-based interventions and the vulnerability of incipient institutional responsiveness to broader political and judicial shocks.

Instituting civics through policy experimentation in contexts of institutional fragility

The *Break Free!* experience in Paternò can be productively interpreted as a public policy experiment unfolding in a context of institutional fragility. Consistently with the practice-based and reflexive methodology adopted in this paper, the discussion does not assess Break Free! as a predefined model or as a fully institutionalised policy solution. Situated practices—help desks, outreach activities, coordination meetings and institutional interlocutions—reframed labour exploitation as a territorial

public problem and tested provisional forms of public action. Although the case engages with issues central to planning scholarship, such as housing precarity, territorial marginalisation and multi-scalar governance, the analysis focuses primarily on the processes through which these issues were translated into policy problems, operational practices and coordination beyond formal institutional settings. In this sense, the case speaks to De Leonardis' understanding of public action as something that may be instituted in third or intermediate spaces, where civic actors and public institutions encounter one another without their relationship being reducible either to opposition or to collaboration.

Labour exploitation in the agricultural sector of Paternò is not a discrete policy failure but emerges from weakly coordinated, partially disconnected policy domains: migration governance, labour regulation, housing provision, transport infrastructure and local welfare systems. Though formally governed by distinct competences and frameworks, these domains remain fragmented in practice. Exploitation is consequently reproduced in the interstices between policy sectors and governance levels, where responsibility is dispersed, accountability is difficult to activate and workers' vulnerabilities remain structurally unaddressed. The issue is therefore not simply the absence of public intervention, but the fragmented and uneven way in which public responsibility is

distributed, deferred or made difficult to activate.

From a public policy perspective, this confirms the limits of emergency-driven and sector-specific responses. Inspections, humanitarian assistance or isolated regularisation measures—while necessary—are insufficient to address a phenomenon that is structurally produced by policy incoherence. In this sense, *Break Free!* represents an attempt to reframe labour exploitation as a cross-cutting public problem, requiring integrated responses and new forms of policy coordination. Rather than implementing predefined solutions, *Break Free!* engaged with existing constraints—housing shortages, transport failures, legal precarity and institutional inertia—as resources for learning and experimentation. Its experimental character lay not in managerial testing of tools, but in acting under uncertainty, learning from situated constraints and progressively adjusting practices without stable institutional routines. The project therefore functioned less as a bounded intervention than as a situated process of inquiry, through which the practical obstacles encountered in the field became sources of policy knowledge. Housing shortages, transport failures, legal precarity and institutional inertia were not external barriers but elements revealing policy interdependencies through which exploitation is reproduced. This dynamic was visible in the help desk, outreach and partnerships. These arrangements

were not merely service-delivery instruments but intermediary devices translating individual needs and fragmented vulnerability into a general understanding of *caporalato* as a territorial and institutional problem.

A crucial enabling condition was the presence of a civic policy actor operating in the intermediate space between citizens and institutions. The Participatory Presidium, rooted in long-standing community activism and policy engagement in the Simeto Valley, did not emerge overnight as a policy entrepreneur. Its capacity to act as an interlocutor resulted from years of capacity-building: accumulation of legal and technical expertise, familiarity with public administration procedures, and durable relationships with labour unions, third-sector organisations and regional authorities. This trajectory shows that civic-led experimental niches depend on pre-existing civic infrastructures capable of transforming situated problems into claims circulating within institutional arenas, not merely on project funding or single tools. This long-term trajectory became evident during the Presidium's participation in drafting the Sicilian regional law on migration and inclusion (2018–2020), which strengthened its policy literacy, legitimacy and ability to engage authoritatively with regional departments and the migration observatory. This marked a shift from local advocacy to multi-scalar policy engagement, enabling *Break Free!* to connect grassroots experimen-

tation with higher-level policy arenas. The Community Policies action further illustrates this ambivalent recognition process: the Memorandum of Understanding with the Sicilian Region formally linked the project to the local support network for the regional *anti-caporalato* help desk, while collaborations with La Bisaccia del Pellegrino, Penelope and Centro Astalli Catania anchored local action within broader welfare, legal-support and advocacy infrastructures. These connections expanded the scale of action but did not eliminate institutional fragility.

The case clarifies how collaboration and conflict coexisted: Break Free! did not stage open confrontation, nor operate within a stable collaborative framework. Its relationship with institutions was marked by trust-building, solicitation, negotiation and pressure. The team cooperated with regional authorities, sought recognition within existing policy frameworks and maintained dialogue with local institutions, while repeatedly exposing limits of existing arrangements, requesting responses, highlighting unresolved responsibilities and keeping institutional attention active. The relevant tension was not between collaboration and conflict as alternative modes, but between the urgency of field-based intervention and the limited capacity of public institutions to absorb, stabilise and act upon project-generated knowledge. This tension was especially visible with the local administration: initial

institutional participation in public meetings was limited and largely symbolic, but over time involvement increased, culminating in the entire municipal executive participating in the public event in May 2025. This shift suggested growing recognition of the issue and a tentative opening of political space for more structured engagement, particularly around housing for migrant workers. The case also highlights the importance of horizontal and vertical policy coordination. One of the most significant outcomes of *Break Free!* was its effort to foster dialogue not only between civil society and public institutions, but also among different public authorities operating at local and regional levels. This coordination role became particularly salient following the dissolution of the municipal administration for mafia infiltration. The dissolution intensified institutional inertia at precisely the moment when embryonic forms of policy coordination and territorial networking were beginning to emerge. In response, *Break Free!* and its partner organisations temporarily assumed functions of mediation, coordination and policy articulation that would normally fall within the remit of local government.

In this respect, the case reveals both potential and limits of experimental governance in weak institutional contexts. Recursive learning did occur: the project generated knowledge, adjusted practices, activated relations and made welfare issue visible. Yet this learn-

ing remained fragile and only partially institutionalised. The issue was not only that the experiment did not scale up into a stable policy arrangement. Rather, the case shows that the learning generated by *Break Free!* remained difficult to consolidate because the institutional context was marked by discontinuous interlocutors, limited administrative capacity and, ultimately, the disruption caused by the dissolution of the municipal administration. This dynamic raises a critical issue in public policy analysis: the risk of civic substitution for the state. While the project demonstrated the capacity of organised civil society to compensate for institutional weaknesses, it also exposed the limits of such compensation. Project-based interventions, however innovative, cannot replace stable public capacity in areas such as housing provision, transport planning and labour market regulation. Instead, their value lies in their ability to catalyse institutional learning, reveal policy blind spots and generate pressure for more integrated and durable public responses.

From a public policy perspective, the case of Paternò suggests two broader lessons. First, addressing labour exploitation requires policy integration rather than policy coordination alone: housing, labour, migration and welfare policies must be designed and implemented as interdependent components of a single policy problem. Second, public innovation initiatives such as *Break Free!* are most effective

when they are embedded in long-term processes of capacity-building and institutional engagement, rather than treated as stand-alone projects. Ultimately, *Break Free!* should be understood not as a replicable model, but as a test ground for policy experimentation in weak-state contexts. It demonstrates how a knowledgeable, organised and territorially rooted civil society can potentially act as a lever for public innovation, influencing policy agendas and governance arrangements where formal public action is fragmented or absent. At the same time, it underscores the need to move beyond project-based solutions towards institutionalised policy frameworks capable of sustaining and scaling the changes initiated through experimentation.

Conclusion

The case of Paternò does not show conflict as open confrontation between civil society and public institutions. Rather, it reveals a more ordinary but analytically relevant dynamic: public action was coproduced through partial collaborations, operational frictions, institutional discontinuities and unresolved responsibilities. This paper has examined the *Break Free!* project as a situated attempt to respond to agricultural labour exploitation in a context of prolonged institutional fragility. By focusing on a specific territorial configuration and on a time-bound initiative, the analysis has deliberately avoided proposing a generalisa-

ble model. Instead, it has explored how civic action can temporarily reshape the conditions under which public problems are recognised, discussed and addressed, even in the absence of stable institutional capacity.

In this sense, the case suggests that civic-led *anti-caporalato* initiatives should be analysed not only in terms of the services they provide, but also in terms of the political and institutional work they perform. Through proximity work, legal and social support, trade-union mobilisation and territorial coalition-building, Break Free! produced situated knowledge about the material and institutional conditions that sustain labour exploitation. Its relevance lies in the attempt to translate this knowledge into policy-relevant claims, challenging narrow interpretations of *caporalato* as merely a criminal or labour-market issue and reframing it as a territorial public problem.

The case also highlights that responses to *caporalato* are constrained not only by market dynamics or legal frameworks, but by the uneven and discontinuous presence of public institutions on the ground. In such contexts, civil society initiatives often become the primary sites where needs are articulated, responsibilities are made visible and minimal forms of coordination are produced. At the same time, the experience documented here points to the limits of relying on project-based and civic-led interventions to address structurally embedded forms of exploitation. The interruption of the process following the dissolution of the municipal administration shows how fragile emergent forms of institutional engagement

can be when they are not anchored in consolidated governance arrangements. This suggests that the effectiveness of civic action cannot be assessed solely in terms of immediate outputs. It must also be understood in relation to the political and institutional conditions that allow civic knowledge, practices and claims to be recognised, sustained and translated into public responsibility. The main challenge, therefore, is not simply whether initiatives such as Break Free! can be scaled up or institutionalised, but whether they can contribute to stabilising a broader public understanding of *caporalato* and to building institutional arrangements capable of acting across fragmented policy domains.

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