Luca Mongelli - Francesco Rullani

Empowering the marginalized: il ruolo delle imprese ibride ad impatto sociale
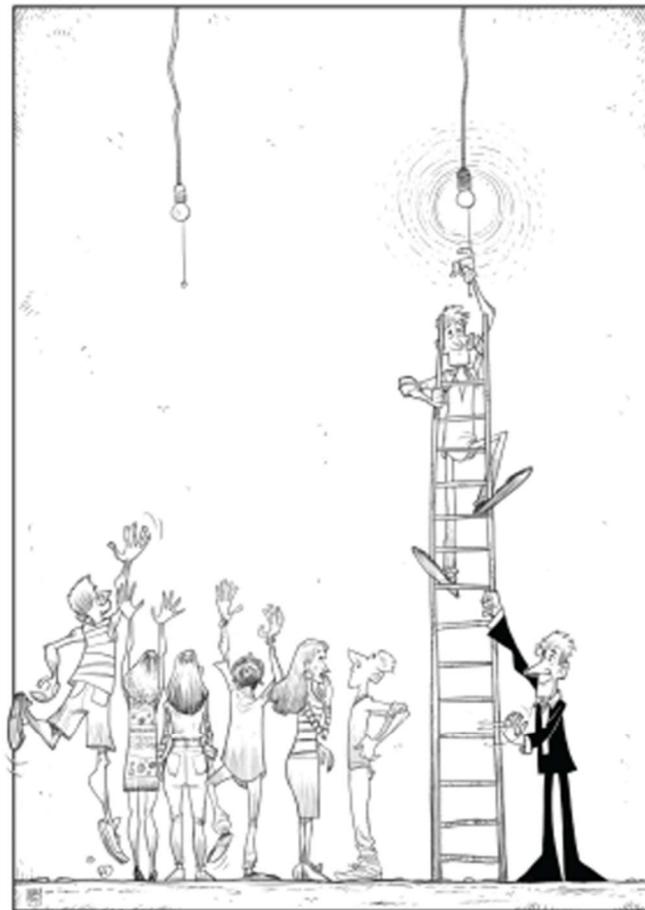
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Introduction

This book is about people

When we discuss empowerment, we refer to the idea of granting power to someone—specifically, someone who evidently lacks that power. Who are we talking about? What kind of power do we mean? How, and above all, why should we confer this power?

In this work, we aim to tackle the challenge of empowering all those who are typically excluded from freely participating in the market, and who, as a result, find themselves marginalized and disadvantaged. Our goal is to enable them to participate freely in market dynamics that generate economic value, thereby facilitating personal development. We will conceptualize this challenge as "the empowerment of the marginalized."

Where do we begin? Who will be our main interlocutor? For what purpose? A defining aspect of our approach is the centrality of the individual. We will start from the person to understand the various development processes that can be enabled by the actions of specific hybrid forms of enterprise, known as Social Business Hybrids, through particular economic mechanisms and within certain social spaces.

Let's take this step by step. As a starting point for our reflection, we begin by asking: Why is the individual so central? There are two main reasons that address this question.

First, we believe that individuals should have ownership over their own growth processes and should be protagonists in their own lives, not mere spectators. From this perspective, integrating categories that have been disconnected from the social and economic processes of our societies due to old and new forms of exclusion (ranging from the impacts of climate change to the extreme financialization of current economic systems) cannot be conceived without considering those who are on the margins, the excluded themselves. Instead, we believe we must act on the conditions that prevent these individuals from autonomously and freely expanding the scope of their actions, reconnecting them to those processes and integrating them—uniquely and specifically according to their circumstances—into the social and economic system.

In this sense, we want to distance ourselves as much as possible from a welfare perspective, which often becomes paternalistic, where integration is conceived in a top-down manner, designed by experts who impose their vision of marginalization on the beneficiaries. This approach leads to measures that are disconnected from the realities of the intervention, generating feelings of low acceptance, misapplication, and sometimes dependency, thereby distorting the individual's specific cultural fabric.

Enabling development from a healthy perspective of subsidiarity means believing in the value of human dignity and the capacity of individuals to engage in virtuous cycles of growth, invest in themselves, and expand their freedoms, spheres of action, and possibilities for self-realization.

This is precisely why we have chosen the capability framework as the theoretical starting point of our analysis, as developed by Sen[1] and Nussbaum[2]: we are interested in delineating the space of action that belongs, at least potentially, to the dignity of those who are typically excluded and marginalized, to understand how they can reclaim that space of action. Marginalization is not the inevitable fate of those deemed "socially incapable" and structurally unable to design their own lives autonomously; rather, it is a restriction, a trap that prevents individuals from realizing their potential and overcoming the limitations of their circumstances.

Secondly, we believe that enabling people to develop their own life paths as protagonists can also unleash their generative capacity—stemming from creativity, specific skills, and diversity—allowing them to participate in value creation, both from an economic standpoint and more broadly in social terms, leading to changes in the power dynamics that hinder their development and that of the societies in which they live[3]. Again, our perspective stands in stark contrast to the welfare approach, where the marginalized are viewed as "economically useless," structurally devoid of any productive capacity, and even lacking in dignity. Instead, we start from the assumption that anyone, by virtue of being human, possesses an innate generative capacity. Based on this assumption, it becomes clear that the interventions typically designed to compensate for the lack of economic value production are often misguided: rather than compensating for the lack of capacity, we should design mechanisms to unleash these generative capacities, untie bonds, activate agency—creating levers that allow those relegated to the margins to express their generativity, starting from their own skills and actions.

In this context, to deepen the concept of agency, we have connected it to the capabilities approach mentioned earlier, but we have also gone further by linking the concept of agency to the literature on Empowerment Theory stemming from Rappaport's studies in Community Psychology[4]. Rappaport's theory stands in opposition to paternalistic and welfare solutions, which we also wish to distance ourselves from. These two approaches share a common root: the belief that the individual has intrinsic value and that, if placed at the center of action, they can pursue a path of growth, leveraging their own generative capacity.

Therefore, the theoretical framework supporting our reflection begins with Sen and Nussbaum's Capability Approach and extends to Rappaport's Empowerment Theory, intertwining the concepts of empowerment, capability, and agency. It is upon this theoretical foundation that we build the core concept that encapsulates the main ideas described so far and around which we want to focus our narrative: the empowerment of the marginalized.

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[1] A. Sen (1999), Development as Freedom, Oxford University Press, New York.

[2] M. Nussbaum (2000), Women and Human Development. The Capability Approach, vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, New York.

[3] L. Becchetti (2022), La rivoluzione della cittadinanza attiva: come sopravvivremo a guerre, pandemie e a un sistema economico e ambientale in crisi, Emi, Verona. L. Becchetti (2022b), La generatività come radice e orizzonte delle politiche sociali, in L. Becchetti, Equità e sviluppo: un programma di legislatura in un mondo in cambiamento, Eurilink University Press, Roma.

[4] J. Rappaport (1981), In Praise of Paradox: A Social Policy of Empowerment Over Prevention, in American Journal of Community Psychology, vol. 9, n. 1, pp. 1-25.

From Individual Potential to Economic Capabilities

If the issue is not the absence of potential among those on the margins of our societies and economies, what challenges must we address? Promoting empowerment involves a dual effort.

First and foremost, it is essential to establish the process of enabling while considering the environmental constraints imposed by marginalization on individuals and their resources. This means taking direct action to dismantle or reduce the external barriers and obstacles that lead to exclusion through targeted interventions. However, it is also necessary to focus on removing the limits that specifically characterize an individual's agency and capabilities, so that they can unleash their generative capacity.

Regarding external barriers and obstacles, Empowerment Theory itself underscores the importance of an ecological approach—one that considers the various environmental dimensions affecting situations of disempowerment and marginalization. It is crucial to remember the centrality of the environments in which individuals live, the structure of these contexts, and the nature of the repressive and exclusionary forces that characterize them. Environmental contexts and social spaces cannot be viewed as mere backdrops to social dynamics. On the contrary, they are powerful realities capable of significantly influencing the enabling mechanisms that can be triggered in favor of the individual[5]. The real configuration of these environments fosters certain dynamics while causing others to wither away prematurely. Addressing the disabling environmental forces means working to neutralize those same forces that have historically generated marginalization. Therefore, to nurture rather than stifle the processes of enabling, it is necessary to create spaces where these forces can no longer reach the individual—spaces where alternative forces geared toward generativity can instead operate. Supporting this stance, we refer to sociological literature, particularly Evans's studies on enabling spaces. In this discussion, we will define these as empowerment loci. Specifically, we will propose two types of spaces: safe spaces, where marginalized individuals are protected from external disabling forces, and open reconnection spaces, where individuals are facilitated in re-establishing contact with the social fabric from which they were previously excluded.

However, the creation of enabling spaces alone is not sufficient: to sustainably counterbalance external forces in the long term, it is necessary to activate other forces—forces that arise from the individual's own potential. Enabling these potentials means generating resources that can support the mechanism, having at one's disposal a "motor," a driving force—the individual themselves—equipped with the motivation and capabilities to reproduce the conditions necessary for their own integration. This shift allows us to move from the typical reintegration perspective, which views the individual as a passive subject, to the perspective of enabling the individual and their capabilities, so that they can actively experience a process of integration.

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[5] J. Rappaport (1981), In Praise of Paradox: A Social Policy of Empowerment Over Prevention, in American Journal of Community Psychology, vol. 9, n. 1, pp. 1-25.

How can this empowerment concretely find a sustainable path? Using capability[6]—as it generally pertains to all the possibilities available to the individual—as a starting point, this discussion will focus on economic capabilities, specifically those related to the role of the individual within the economic value creation process. We will delve into the processes of economic value creation that support the individual's empowerment through their capabilities. In particular, we will explore how value can be generated precisely by unlocking the generative value of individuals, and we will propose two main mechanisms for activating economic capabilities: enabling creation, through which individuals are directly included in the process of economic value creation, and enabling access, which allows individuals to access the means—whether goods or services—from which they were previously excluded, enabling them to make choices as customers—in other words, directly in transactions—or as simple beneficiaries.

Hybrid Organizations and Enabling Spaces as Tools for Empowerment

Enabling economic capabilities is certainly beyond the reach of individuals, especially those in situations of extreme marginalization. In this paper, we will develop an approach that centers on the individual, highlighting their potential, and extends to the organizations closest to them and their specific challenges to unlock that potential. Once again, Empowerment Theory, with its ecological perspective, emphasizes the importance of focusing on those entities that are most proximate to the individual within their context. These organizations can trigger bottom-up enabling dynamics that place the individual at the center of action.

In this discussion, we will focus on empowering organizations that effectively combine individual enablement with economic value creation through business models that enhance individual capabilities and generativity.

What types of organizations are we referring to? We are already familiar with many entities addressing these challenges, particularly entrepreneurial ventures that pursue social goals through hybrid business models, hence referred to as Social Business Hybrids[7]. However, despite our growing understanding of these hybrid enterprises, there remain numerous questions regarding their business models, the strategies they employ to enable the aforementioned economic capabilities, and their ability to generate a positive impact on marginalized individuals. The challenge we aim to address is to comprehend these organizational models, their strategies, and their key mechanisms, ultimately proposing a taxonomic representation of them as models of Empowering Social Business Hybrids.

The Proposal

Marginalized individuals, economic capabilities, enabling spaces, hybrid enterprises, and business models: all these elements form the key pillars of our conceptual proposal. Based on the theoretical framework and the intersection of the Capability Approach and Empowerment

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[6] As we will see later, the concepts of capacity and capability are fundamentally different.

[7] P. Venturi, F. Zandonai (2014), Ibridi Organizzativi: l'innovazione sociale generata dal gruppo cooperativo CGM, Il Mulino, Bologna; P. Venturi, F. Zandonai (2016), Imprese Ibride. Modelli d'innovazione sociale per rigenerare valori, Egea, Milano.

Theory, we have combined two main dimensions: on one side, the mechanisms for activating economic capabilities—i.e., enabling creation and access facilitated by various forms of Social Business Hybrids; on the other, the locus of empowerment, which encompasses types of enabling spaces—safe spaces and open spaces for reconnection. From this combination, we have developed our theoretical framework: the matrix of Empowering Social Business Hybrids. This matrix will allow us to delineate four theoretical categories, four empowerment models that we will analyze in depth through four case studies: MadeInCarcere, Ridaje, Pedius, and Dynamo.

Structure and Methodological Notes

The aforementioned analytical methodology has dictated a specific structure for the text. The first four chapters aim to provide a comprehensive overview, both empirically and theoretically, with the goal of proposing an original lens on the topic of extreme marginalization and the concept of empowerment. The second part, structured into another four chapters, focuses on an in-depth examination of the four case studies mentioned earlier, one for each chapter, which represent the practical application of the model of Empowering Social Business Hybrids derived from the discussions in the first part.

In detail, the first two chapters will utilize global data published by the United Nations and other institutions of comparable standing to clarify notions of poverty, extreme marginalization, personal development, and enablement, ultimately defining the concepts of empowerment and disempowerment within the theoretical framework of the Capability Approach. The third chapter will draw from the literature of Community Psychology, revisiting the ecological approach to the individual to enrich the concepts of empowerment and disempowerment, highlighting the necessity of enabling spaces on one side and the role of empowering organizations as enabling agents capable of creating and utilizing those spaces on the other. The fourth chapter will illustrate how these organizations align with specific forms of hybrid organizations, namely Social Business Hybrids, and how they can activate the economic capabilities of individuals. We will encapsulate all of this in the matrix of Empowering Social Business Hybrids, a taxonomy capable of explaining how these organizations can promote empowerment through mechanisms linked to economic capabilities applied within various enabling spaces.

Additionally, regarding this first part, a methodological clarification is necessary. Concerning the theoretical horizon of the Capability Approach and Empowerment Theory, we first sought to identify a body of studies that would best represent the intersection between these two strands. However, we found that, despite similar premises and conceptions of some foundational ideas, the two literatures have followed distinct paths, often occupying distant spaces. For instance, while discussions within the Capability Approach have encompassed a wide range of perspectives—consistent with the topic at hand[8], including public policy issues

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[8] S. Alkire (2005), Why the Capability Approach?, in Journal of Human Development, vol. 6, n. 1, pp. 115-135.

related to social exclusion[9], inequalities, and human rights[10], alongside empirical studies focused on measurement methods—the concept of empowerment within Empowerment Theory has undergone significant evolution, leading to the definition of empowering organizations but within a trajectory different from the original themes of marginalization. To establish a clear relationship between the two literatures that captures the key concepts of interest, we traced back to the foundational studies of the Capability Approach, reconstructing the connections with the theme of Empowerment Theory and incorporating the sociological perspective of Evans concerning spaces. We analyzed the writings of Sen, Nussbaum, Rappaport, and Evans to uncover their links, subsequently connecting them with developments in Empowerment Theory and, finally, with contemporary literature on Social Business Hybrids, in order to formulate a perspective that views these organizational forms through the lens of empowering marginalized individuals.

The second part of this work is also organized into four chapters, each of which will delve into the individual models identified within the four quadrants of the matrix of Empowering Social Business Hybrids. In each chapter, after briefly outlining the distinctive characteristics of each empowerment model, we will develop case studies—i.e., MadeInCarcere, Ridaje, Pedius, and Dynamo—dedicated to each of the four models of Social Business Hybrids in the matrix. For each case, we will first present the relevant environmental context and the disabling characteristics affecting the individual. We will then analyze the strategies underlying the matrix and how these translate into operational mechanisms. Here, the methodology used will be based on classic qualitative research, informed by the works of Yin[11], Eisenhardt[12], and Gioia[13], focusing on collecting data regarding the ongoing micro-processes in the cases at hand to provide a much more detailed and concrete picture of the mechanisms that constitute the four models. In particular, the data consists of transcripts of interviews, documents, articles, and other archival sources, as well as field notes gathered from periods of ethnographic study,

[9] In The Cambridge Handbook of the Capability Approach, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: J. Wolff (2020), Social Exclusion and Capability Development, pp. 562-575; S. Seth, M. Santos (2020), Multidimensional Inequality and Human Development, pp. 392-416; R. Van der Hoeven (2020), Income Inequality and Human Capabilities, pp. 601-623; P. Vizard (2020), The Capability Approach and Human Rights, pp. 624-642; J. Krishnakumar (2020), Econometric and Statistical Models for Operationalizing the Capability Approach, pp. 453-476. S. Alkire (2020), The Research Agenda on Multidimensional Poverty Measurement: Important and as yet Unanswered Questions, in OPHI Working Paper, n. 119, pp. 417-436.

[10] In Italy, this line of thought has seen significant development in discussions on economic growth and personal well-being: M. Musella (2021), Sen e lo sviluppo umano: un approccio alternativo all'economia politica, Giappichelli, Torino.

[11] R.K. Yin (2009), Case Study Research. Design and Methods, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks; H.G. Ridder (2012), Review of Case Study Research. Design and Methods, 4th ed., by R.K. Yin, in Zeitschrift Für Personalforschung (German Journal of Research in Human Resource Management), vol. 26, n. 1, pp. 93-95.

[12] K.M. Eisenhardt (2021), What is the Eisenhardt Method, Really?, in Strategic Organization, vol. 19, n. 1, pp. 147-160; K.M. Eisenhardt, M.E. Graebner (2007), Theory Building from Cases: Opportunities and Challenges, in The Academy of Management Journal, vol. 50, n. 1, pp. 25-32; K.M. Eisenhardt (1989), Building Theories from Case Study Research, in The Academy of Management Review, vol. 14, n. 4, pp. 532-550.

[13] D.A. Gioia, K.G. Corley (2012), Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research: Notes on the Gioia Methodology, in Organizational Research Methods, vol. 16, n. 1, pp. 15-31; D.A. Gioia (2020), A Systematic Methodology for Doing Qualitative Research, in The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, vol. 57, n. 1, pp. 20-29.

which sometimes evolved into a form of participant observation[14]. In the introduction of each case, we will strive to detail the specific data collected.

For the first case we will present—MadeInCarcere, which serves as our starting point and has thus been analyzed in a more structured manner—we initially captured the foundational concepts directly from the data collected through a coding procedure, subsequently organizing them into increasingly general categories, the themes of Gioia and the constructs of Eisenhardt, ultimately producing a model that accounts for the identified micro-processes in the case. We used this model to interpret the data in the other three cases, enriching or correcting it where the data indicated discrepancies between the observed phenomena and the reference model or showed richness not present in the first case.

In the concluding section, intended to provide an overview of the different cases in light of the theoretical model outlined, we will highlight the useful lessons that can be drawn from what we have observed. In particular, we will focus on how to best utilize the various types of enabling spaces and how to construct value creation models that can be based on the different empowerment processes discussed.

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[14] K.M. DeWalt, B.R. DeWalt (2022), Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, CA.