

RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Redefining the Strategic Integrated Employee Reward Mix: Contextual Evolution and Organisational Transformation

Reshaping Labor Intermediation: An Integrated Workforce Management Strategy to Contrast Agricultural Workers' Exploitation in Italy

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ABSTRACT

Labor exploitation within agri-food supply chains poses significant ethical and managerial challenges, particularly in Mediterranean contexts where irregular employment practices persist. This study investigates the case of NoCap, a third-party ethical certification initiative operating in Italy that integrates social responsibility into agricultural labor governance. By addressing structural dysfunctions such as informal labor markets, precarious working conditions, and power asymmetries along the supply chain, NoCap offers a multidimensional workforce management model and reward model. The study explores how this social innovation can serve as a viable alternative to illegal labor intermediation, promoting ethical value creation and employee well-being. Adopting a qualitative single-case study design, data were collected through 22 semi-structured interviews with workers, farmers, retailers, NGOs, and experts. Data were analyzed using the Gioia methodology, allowing for an inductively grounded theorization of the organizational model. Findings highlight that NoCap's certification model contributes to improving transparency, fair wages, and non-monetary benefits such as labor conditions, while simultaneously enabling downstream actors to leverage ethical value as a reputational asset. Retailers and farmers reported positive perceptions of the initiative's potential to differentiate products and strengthen consumer trust, although limitations remain regarding economic scalability, logistical capacity, and marginal profitability. These results underline the strategic relevance of ethical labor governance and socially motivated reward mixes as a competitive positioning mechanism in socially sensitive markets. The study advances theoretical understandings of public-private governance models, non-monetary employee rewards, and public-private complementarities in business ethics. It offers managerial insights into how socially driven certifications may serve as instruments of both risk mitigation and value generation in agri-food systems.

1 | Introduction

In recent years, as advanced economies have developed, labor shortages have reshaped agri-food systems, with countries shifting from a state of surplus to one of increasing scarcity (Christiaensen et al. 2021). This demographic shift, combined with declining interest in agricultural work among the native population, has led to an increased reliance on migrant labor to maintain production levels (Ryan 2023). Consequently, in most high-income countries, migrant workers are essential, regardless of their temporary or undocumented status (Reid et al. 2021). In

Europe, they have become a structural component of the agricultural workforce, addressing labor shortages while contributing to the sector's economic viability (Kalantaryan et al. 2021). The reliance on migrant workers is higher in sectors with heavy labor demand, such as the fruit and vegetable (F&V) industry. It also varies between EU members, with Italy and Spain showing the highest share of foreign farmworkers (Crea 2024).

While migrant workers play a crucial role in mitigating rural areas' depopulation and sustaining food production systems (Collantes et al. 2014; Corrado et al. 2019), they also face

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Highlights

- A multidimensional and multistakeholder approach is crucial for reconfiguring working conditions and combating labor exploitation in Italian agriculture.
- Ethical certification, fair labor management, and enhanced transparency can promote social and economic sustainability in agri-food systems.
- Integrated models that provide legal employment, housing, and transport services improve workers' non-monetary benefits.
- The scalability of similar social innovations requires institutional coordination and engagement of private-sector actors.

significant labor-related issues. The discrepancy in working conditions between migrant and native workers is widely recognized, with agriculture being one of the most unequal sectors (Amo-Agyei 2020). Consistent with this trend, the EU Labour Force Survey indicates that migrant workers are more likely to hold temporary jobs and receive lower wages in the agricultural sector (Ruiz-Ramírez et al. 2024). In Italy, irregular employment remains pervasive: in 2023, 17.4% of the agricultural workforce was irregular, and the undeclared added value associated with irregular work accounted for 15.3% of the sector's total (Istat 2023, 2024). Concurrently, data from the National Labor Inspectorate (INL) reveal that 59.2% of inspections detected labor law violations, confirming the persistence of precarious employment conditions (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto 2024).

A key manifestation of this systemic vulnerability in Italy is the persistence of the *caporalato* system, an illicit labor intermediation system that exploits the precariousness of farmworkers by offering employment, accommodation, and transportation to the fields. The literature widely describes *caporalato* as a system characterized by coercive working conditions, wage suppression, and human rights violations (Guidi and Berti 2023; Perrotta and Sacchetto 2014). Beyond its criminal dimensions, scholars have emphasized its embeddedness in the economic dynamics of agri-food supply chains (Perrotta 2014; Salvia 2020). Despite Italy's legal efforts, Law No. 199/2016 against *caporalato*, the persistence of exploitation suggests that purely repressive measures are insufficient. However, existing research has mainly focused on workers' vulnerabilities or farmers' dependence on irregular labor, overlooking approaches that act at multiple levels of the agri-food chain and are aimed at contrasting *caporalato*. Consequently, a gap in the literature remains regarding how integrated governance models might contrast the *caporalato* while maintaining both social and economic sustainability. To close this research gap, the present study has set out to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. *Can a multidimensional and multistakeholder approach to labor management effectively contrast the phenomenon of caporalato?*

RQ2. *How and why can such an approach be economically sustainable for all actors in the agri-food system?*

In light of the above, this study explores the case of NoCap, an Italian association that promotes a socially and environmentally sustainable innovation in the agri-food chain through a workforce management platform and an ethical certification model. NoCap aims to provide an innovative paradigm for food production as an alternative to the *caporalato* system. Therefore, this case study investigates how a market-oriented yet socially driven innovation can serve as a viable governance model capable of reducing labor exploitation and fostering fair value creation in the agri-food sector. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated analytical approach, which jointly examines workforce management, ethical certification, and price negotiation mechanisms as interconnected components of a single governance strategy. Accordingly, the study draws on the social innovation literature, which analyses how multistakeholder initiatives may reconfigure governance arrangements to address structurally embedded social problems.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Definition, Causes, and Framing of the Caporalato System

Caporalato is a system of illicit labor intermediation that has been widespread in Italian agriculture since the mid-nineteenth century (Perrotta 2014). The '*caporali*', the brokers, provide informal labor to farmers, organize work teams, arrange transportation to the workplace, and provide accommodation (Fanizza and Omizzolo 2019). Although involving economic actors, understanding its causes requires interdisciplinary approaches (Malanski et al. 2021). Research has linked *caporalato* and unethical labor practices, such as wage reduction (Uleri et al. 2023), charging deductions (Guidi and Berti 2023), forced overtime (Perrotta and Sacchetto 2014), and poor working conditions, including violence (Poppi and Travaglini 2019).

Its persistence also reflects a market response to structural needs. Scaturro (2021) frames *caporalato* within a demand-supply framework, identifying the economic drivers leading farmers to rely on illicit intermediaries. Wage differentials lead to low-paid farm jobs covered by foreign workers. This dynamic is particularly evident in small Italian farms, especially in cases of labor-intensive production (Corrado et al. 2019), which is also reinforced by the local population's reluctance to undertake physically demanding, low-skilled jobs (Garrapa 2017). Moreover, the asymmetrical bargaining power between large-scale retailers and small producers further pressures farmgate prices, often forcing farmers to cut labor costs (Corrado et al. 2019; Ippolito et al. 2021).

Consequently, migrant seasonal workers sustain Italian agriculture (Anderson et al. 2021), a condition that became evident during the COVID-19 crisis, when mobility restrictions exposed severe labor shortages (Corrado and Caruso 2022). Despite the restrictive immigration policies, undocumented migrants continue to fill essential roles, often living in informal settlements (Perrotta and Sacchetto 2014). In this regard, *caporali* act as intermediaries satisfying both labor demand and migrant needs, effectively substituting for institutional inefficiencies and consolidating *caporalato* as a structural mechanism of the agricultural sector (see Figure 1).

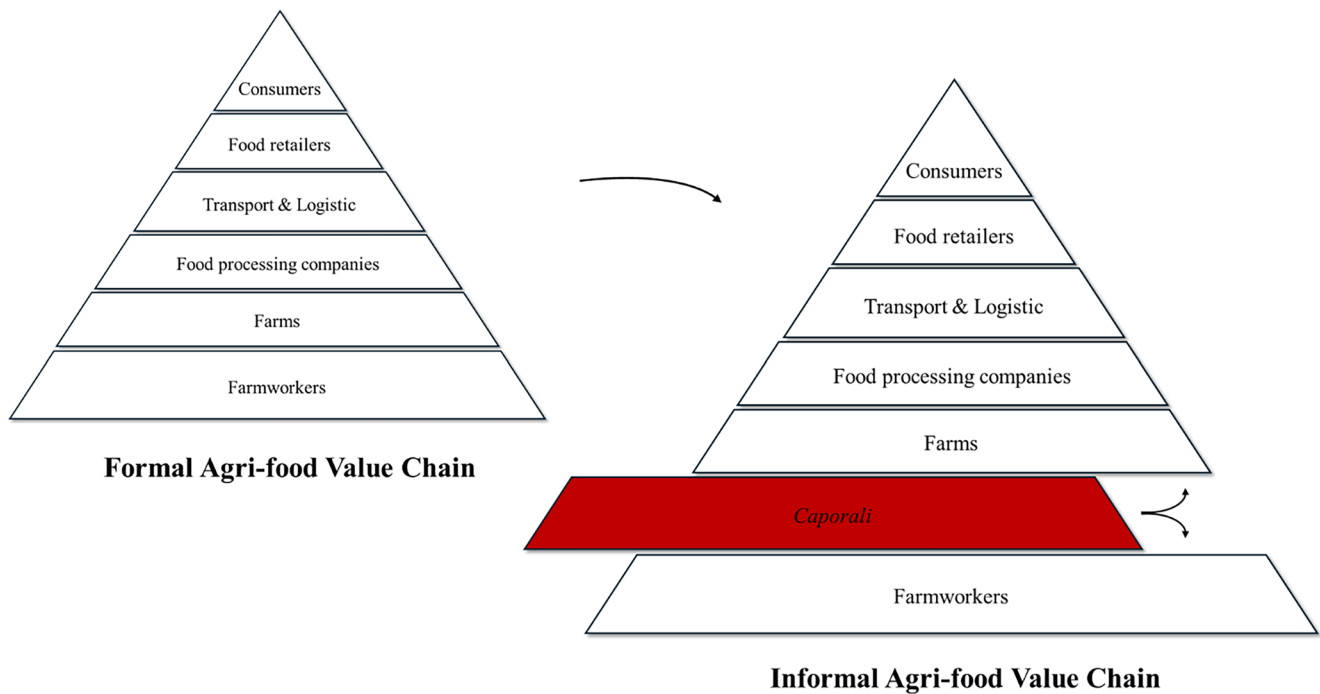


FIGURE 1 | The role of *caporalato* in the agri-food supply chain. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/jsc.70063)]

Recent studies move beyond a purely criminalized interpretation, situating *caporalato* within broader supply chain dynamics (Salvia 2020), as an “infrastructure of farm labor recruitment” (Perrotta and Raeymaekers 2023) or a form of “service agency” (Omizzolo 2020). Some authors even emphasize the complicity of irregular migrants who accept informal employment due to a lack of alternatives (Guidi and Berti 2023; Schneider et al. 2023; Uleri et al. 2023). Viewing *caporali* as actors within the agri-food chain suggests the need to consider whether their functions could be replaced within a legal framework rather than merely eradicated. The absence of such perspectives underscores the need for an integrated policy and governance design that aligns labor intermediation mechanisms with regulatory enforcement and fair working conditions.

2.2 | Mitigating Labor Exploitation Through Social Innovation

Addressing complex challenges requires multidimensional transformation of existing systems (Folke et al. 2011). Social innovations, defined as “products, processes or programs that profoundly change the basic routines, resource and authority flows, or beliefs of the social system in which the innovation occurs” (Westley and Antadze 2010), play a crucial role in driving such transformations (Moore et al. 2018). These initiatives may take various forms, ranging from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) oriented firms to non-profit organizations pursuing systemic change (Phillips et al. 2015).

Given the complexity of agricultural labor exploitation, meaningful progress depends on collaborative and multi-actor approaches (Zadra and Elsen 2024), as unilateral initiatives are insufficient to address labor issues (Nayak et al. 2019). The effectiveness of social innovations depends on their ability to

mobilize diverse stakeholders towards shared objectives (Ferraro et al. 2015). When embedded within the structures they seek to transform, they can promote institutional adaptation and long-term impact (Pato and Teixeira 2016). To achieve systemic influence, Moore et al. (2015) indicate that social innovation must scale *out* (reach new territories and actors), *deep* (foster cultural shifts), and *up* (embed within laws and policies). Accordingly, partnerships with government institutions enhance this scalability and sustainability (Marchetti et al. 2020; Shirgholami et al. 2024). Indeed, Kalkanci et al. (2019) emphasize that businesses, policymakers, and civil society organizations must align to promote social sustainability. Otherwise, social innovations remain fragmented and ineffective. This literature frames social innovations not merely as localized experimentations, but as governance mechanisms capable of reconfiguring labor relations and addressing structural forms of exploitation.

Within this perspective, transparency and ethical certification should be framed as operational tools through which social innovations mobilize markets and actors around labor standards. Transparency facilitates access to information and strengthens ethical consumption behaviors (Branstad and Solem 2020; Jaeger-Erben et al. 2015). Ethical certification schemes are crucial for communicating these commitments and translating social goals into recognizable market signals. Among the most common are B2B standards, such as SA8000, which certify compliance with labor rights, and B2C labels, such as Fairtrade, which target consumers directly. However, schemes like Fairtrade have achieved limited penetration in certain food categories, such as F&V (Ribeiro-Duthie et al. 2021).

Consumer responsiveness to labor-focused certification (Mirabella et al. 2025; Narayanan and Singh 2023) is therefore relevant as it enables social innovations to align economic incentives with fair labor practices. A social innovation strategy

promoted through ethical labelling may thus serve as an effective mechanism to convey the value of fair labor standards, aligning market incentives with social sustainability.

3 | Materials and Methods

3.1 | NoCap

To investigate the research questions, the NoCap association was selected as an exemplary illustrative case study. NoCap is an Italian association founded in 2011 to contrast labor exploitation and *caporalato* in the agricultural sector and promote a socially and environmentally sustainable agri-food chain. To this end, it developed a labor management platform for the commercialization of F&V, including both fresh (e.g., oranges, cabbage, melons, peppers, tomatoes) and processed products, such as tomato passata. The system integrates labor management with housing services, legal assistance, and transportation to farms, achieved through collaboration with other projects. Since 2019, NoCap has launched an ethical certification with its homonymous name to promote fair food products. Through a network protocol, supply chain actors agree on fair prices based on fairness and transparency criteria. NoCap is funded by a cooperative that earns a royalty on a percentage of product sales, ensuring economic sustainability and balanced profit margins among actors.

Auditing is conducted internally by the NoCap verification team for the C.R.E.I. cooperative, while the DQA certification body certifies NoCap's assessment of work ethics. The auditing process follows a multi-criteria matrix covering workers' rights, environmental standards, fair pricing, and animal welfare. At the end, NoCap certifies specific farm productions made in compliance with the requirements of the multi-criteria matrix.¹ However, despite the presence of the certification body, NoCap's auditing process is not entirely free from potential conflicts of interest.

NoCap also manages logistics and negotiations between farmers and retailers to achieve a fair final sale price for consumers. Consequently, NoCap represents an integrated system for agricultural labor governance, offering a case example of a market-based yet socially oriented response to the problem of labor exploitation.

3.2 | Research Design and Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative single-case study followed by the Gioia methodology for data analysis (Gioia et al. 2013). The case study method enables an in-depth investigation of complex contemporary social phenomena, maintaining a holistic real-world perspective (Yin 2009). This approach aligns with understanding how and why NoCap's initiative can be effective within its socio-economic and policy context.

Case studies are particularly suitable for underexplored and emerging phenomena, as they enable the collection of multiple sources of evidence to ensure validity through triangulation. Primary data were collected through semi-structured

interviews, complemented by secondary sources, including institutional reports and news articles. The Gioia methodology was employed to develop theoretical insights grounded in the data inductively (Gioia et al. 2013).

Following the assumption of "knowledgeable agents" (Gioia et al. 2013), interviews focused on informants' experiences and avoided suggesting terminologies or constructs. The selection of participants aimed to encompass all economic stakeholders involved in NoCap's activities. A semi-structured guide was designed with open-ended questions tailored to each informant's role, encouraging the emergence of unanticipated yet relevant themes (Adams 2015). The number of participants was not determined a priori, but interviews continued until no new codes emerged, moving from 'minimal' to 'maximal information' scenarios as described by van Rijnsoever (2017).

The final sample consisted of 22 participants, selected using both purposive and convenience sampling techniques (Table 1). Two F&V farmers were interviewed (F1 and F2). As NoCap's affiliates vary annually, these two farmers were selected as they are the largest and most established. Two Italian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) agents with managerial roles belonging to two different organizations were interviewed, considering their affiliation with NoCap: N1, responsible for worker housing, and N2, in charge of legal support, logistics, and transport. For the same reasons as the farmers, two major food retail companies were interviewed, one operating in Southern Italy (D1A, D2A, and D3A) and the other nationwide (D4B, D5B, and D6B). A member of the local agricultural trade union was interviewed as a knowledgeable informant regarding the problems faced by workers and the informal settlements. Then, a total of eight seasonal foreign workers were interviewed, four of whom belonged to NoCap. In addition, two experts on legal frameworks related to labor exploitation were interviewed to collect information regarding the policy and economic background of *caporalato*. Workers were selected through convenience sampling due to accessibility constraints, while other participants were chosen purposively to ensure representation of all relevant actors in the NoCap network. Interviews were conducted in Italian, mainly face-to-face in August 2024, and others via video call or phone between September and November 2024. Sessions lasted 30–90 min and were audio-recorded and transcribed with participants' consent.

3.3 | Data Analysis

The approach adopted in this study follows the Gioia Methodology to develop a rigorous model grounded in the data by translating informants' perspectives into theoretical constructs. The Gioia Methodology, a qualitative approach grounded in interpretivist and constructivist perspectives (Magnani and Gioia 2023), seeks to build theoretical understanding by moving from informants' narratives to abstract concepts through a systematic inductive-abductive process to understand how or why a phenomenon occurs (Gioia et al. 2022). This approach is particularly suited to studies dealing with nascent theory aimed at concept development (Edmondson and McManus 2007). Moreover, its use is suited for the in-depth understanding of a social phenomenon

TABLE 1 | Key informant interviewed.

Key informant	Subject	Role	Interview mode	Sampling
F1	Farmer	Manager	Face-to-face	Purposive
F2	Farmer	Manager	Face-to-face	Purposive
N1	NGO	Agent	Face-to-face	Purposive
N2	NGO	Agent	Face-to-face	Purposive
U	Unionist	Agent	Phone	Purposive
D1A	Distributor	Quality and Assurance	Videocall	Purposive
D2A	Distributor	Buyer	Videocall	Purposive
D3A	Distributor	Responsible for the NoCap project	Videocall	Purposive
D4B	Distributor	Social Responsibility Specialist	Videocall	Purposive
D5B	Distributor	Sustainability Manager	Videocall	Purposive
D6B	Distributor	Buyer	Phone	Purposive
O1	NoCap organization	Press Office	Phone	Purposive
W1	Manual worker	Seasonal worker	Face-to-face	Convenience
W2	Manual worker	Seasonal worker	Face-to-face	Convenience
W3	Manual worker	Seasonal worker	Face-to-face	Convenience
W4	Manual worker	NoCap seasonal worker	Face-to-face	Convenience
W5	Manual worker	NoCap seasonal worker	Face-to-face	Convenience
W6	Manual worker	NoCap seasonal worker	Face-to-face	Convenience
W7	Manual worker	NoCap seasonal worker	Face-to-face	Convenience
W8	Manual worker	Seasonal worker	Face-to-face	Convenience
E1	Expert	Agent	Videocall	Purposive
E2	Expert	President	Videocall	Purposive

when its interrelated parts “cannot be separated, but must be examined in a holistic context” (Magnani and Gioia 2023). Each transcript was carefully analyzed, and relevant excerpts were coded using the informants’ own terminologies. Relevant excerpts were defined as segments in which key informants expressed opinions, judgments, or descriptions incorporating a degree of subjectivity. In the initial phase, 126 first-order codes (informant-based) were generated and later refined through iterative comparison and merging of similar categories. Each sentence conveying assertions, opinions, or knowledge was coded as first-order codes regardless of the research question. Subsequently, codes not directly related to the research questions were excluded. The final set included 41 first-order codes (Table S1). These were then grouped into second-order themes (theory-based) at a higher level of abstraction until ‘theoretical saturation’ was reached (Glaser and Strauss 2017). Finally, second-order themes were grouped into a more distilled categorization of aggregate dimensions.

This coding process produced a data structure (Figure 2) that illustrates the analytical progression from informant statements to the theoretical dimensions. The structure is not sequential or causal, but hierarchical, showing the conceptual organization of themes. To ensure reliability, multiple authors were involved in

the coding process and the interpretation of findings, following Lincoln and Guba (1985). This collaborative cross-validation reduced researcher bias and enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis.

4 | Results

The results provide an in-depth understanding of the role of *caporalato* within the agri-food supply chain and assess the effectiveness of the strategies promoted by NoCap, in line with the study’s objectives. The analysis identified five aggregate dimensions, each supported by second-order themes illustrated through representative quotes (Table 2).

4.1 | Labor Market Dysfunction

Evidence revealed persistent structural dysfunctions in the agricultural labor market. Farmers reported a chronic shortage of skilled labor, particularly pronounced during specific seasonal periods, while public employment services were criticized as ineffective in matching labor supply and demand. Consequently, these inefficiencies sustain informal settlements that serve as reservoirs

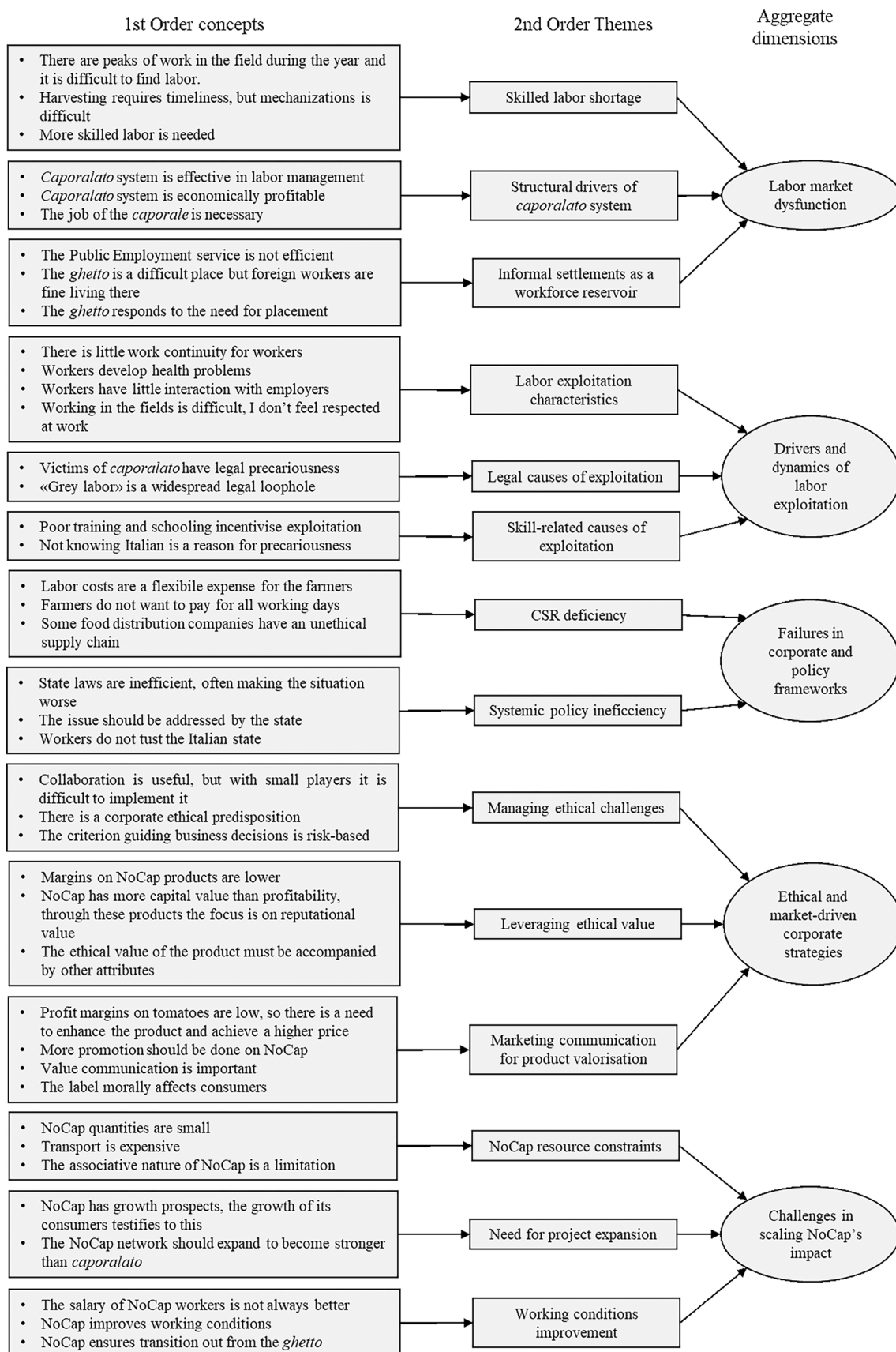


FIGURE 2 | Data structure.

TABLE 2 | Data supporting interpretations of second-order themes.

Theme	Representatives quotations
Labor market dysfunction	
Skilled labor shortage	“Specialized people who today would be needed much more than unskilled labor are normally needed” (F1) “For example, now the companies, all the companies want tractor drivers, because all the Italian tractor drivers are retiring. There are no more tractor drivers, they are all my age” (N2) “There are certainly fewer people willing to work in agriculture. There is difficulty in finding manpower” (D3)
Informal settlements as a workforce reservoir	“Since you have a very short time frame between when the request is made and when you need it, maybe the worker has found another job, because they can't just sit around waiting” (N1) “It is for that [exploitation] that informal settlements exist just as ghettos exist. Informal settlements are reserves of workforce” (N2) “We have truly taken a piece of humanity and relegated it to the margins of our civilization; we deliberately keep it on the margins only because we need hands that come to work for us every now and then” (E1)
Structural drivers of the <i>caporalato</i> system	“The <i>caporalato</i> system saves you all those steps that are unfortunately necessary when it comes to finding workers” (F1) “The <i>caporalato</i> system is convenient because the problem is finding the manpower; he manages to organize a team of workers that otherwise could not be found, or with slower times, especially in the period in which there are peaks” (F2) “So, on the one hand, <i>caporalato</i> system is economically advantageous, unfortunately. This also needs to be said, because 1500 euros monthly in agriculture are not easy to make. I see the workers' paychecks, and they never reach those earnings” (N1)
Drivers and dynamics of labor exploitation	
Labor exploitation characteristics	“Then you see them at 60 years old who are worn out by work, have multiple hernias, have not been treated, have high blood pressure problems because, in any case, when you do physical work, you develop heart problems” (N1) “Because where I spent 2 years farming and animal husbandry, a chainsaw cut off my leg, you understand?” W1 “Yes, in Borgo, without contract. You work until you finish the work, until the morning, no contract” (W2)
Legal causes of exploitation	“At that time, there were no documents, nothing, you understand? That problem, that is why I don't like working in the countryside” (W1) “For me, to me who has a finger on the throat from people, it can't be more than saying a person: if you don't have a house, I won't give you the job, if you don't have a bank account, I won't give you the job. He tells me, What reason is that? I can never understand” (W8) “From what I've seen, exploitation here is linked to the condition. I can blackmail because you can't go and live somewhere else: you have to work illegally” (U)
Skill-related causes of exploitation	“Here, 80% of the workers don't speak Italian well. The boss comes to talk to them, they don't even understand” (W7) “Sometimes they don't know where the working days are written, or we check on the INPS website” (U) “Those who become victims of <i>caporalato</i> are those who have fewer tools to defend themselves, and therefore those who have low levels of education” (N1)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Theme	Representatives quotations
Failures in corporate and policy frameworks	
CSR deficiency	“These farmers, the first thing they say to you is: «but let’s make one thing clear: I won’t put them in my paycheck every day». What do you do? Do you leave them without work and force them to return to the informal settlement, or do you accept this compromise with the farmer?” (N1) “There is also the difficulty in finding owners who want to make the contract. In Italy, unfortunately, there is this problem” (O) “It is, however, clear that the large-scale retail trade plays a very important role in this whole situation” (E1)
Systemic policy inefficiency	“Institutions should probably step in and introduce rules that can better regulate this uncomfortable situation that is being created in terms of work” (D2) “I continue to work for 20-odd years, paid contributions for 20-odd years. 1 day, you come and throw me out of the house, you throw me out right in the village, you don’t give me any more work, you don’t give me anything anymore, for what? For a law that came out like that, for no reason at all” (W8) “So, the problem in this country is that the tools already exist, they already exist on paper. But there is an evident political will not to make them work and perhaps an inability to put them together” (E1)
Ethical and market-driven corporate strategies	
Managing ethical challenges	“However, in the DNA of our group, there is an attention to work, workers, collaborators, and employees under any qualification” (D3) “Only the most structured companies do it [addressing social sustainability], certainly on a cultural level, but also on a means level, on a political level, and on a trade economy level” (F1) “The criterion that guides us is risk-based” (D5)
Leveraging ethical value	“It is not through those products [NoCap labeled] that we seek profitability. Through those products, we seek to have a social impact on the people in the places where we are that is shared” (D1) “We prefer not to create a selling price with the margins necessary for the product’s economic viability, but rather a sort of investment is made by giving up that margin” (D2) “Reputation for sure and coherence towards our brand” (D6)
Marketing communication for product valorization	“From an economic point of view, it is not even that convenient” (F2) “That is, a tomato pays less to the producer, 50 cents per kg. You can’t go lower than that price, because, well, that is the fundamental point” (N2) “From a remuneration point of view in the field, there should certainly be at least 20% more than what is paid for tomatoes today or what is perceived by the final consumer” (F1)
Challenges in scaling NoCap’s impact	
NoCap resource constraints	“The only criticality I think is that it is a project of an association” (U) “For the commercial part, we really haven’t done huge volumes. It is always been a niche” (D1) “We receive few orders from NoCap” (F2)
Need for project expansion	“I am confident because the project is just beginning, and it is just a matter of getting to know more about NoCap’s activity” (F2) “But the fact that people are getting closer and closer to certain types of purchases within the store and various other things, makes it clear how this hustle and bustle, this attention is increasing” (D1) “I think we are in a growth phase” (O)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Theme	Representatives quotations
Working conditions improvement	“So, if you are part of the NoCap network and have all your days declared, your agricultural unemployment will be much higher than a person who is exploited” (N1) “They monthly earn slightly less, but they have a real house, instead of living in a slum” (U) “With them [NoCap] it is regular. Instead, when you are not with them, you can have your wage later” (W6)

of an informal and unskilled workforce, reinforcing the dependence on exploitative systems.

(Amo-Agyei 2020), the illegal status of migrants and the lack of skills are factors of workers' vulnerability.

4.1.1 | Skilled Labor Shortage

The scarcity of skilled workers limits mechanization and forces the reliance on seasonal manual workers. Farmers highlighted the difficulty of finding qualified machine operators, claiming that the lack of training among workers is a barrier to overcome. They also attributed this need to the speed of short harvesting cycles in order to preserve product quality.

4.2.1 | Labor Exploitation Characteristics

While labor exploitation is characterized by working conditions, the informants (F1, N1, U, W1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7) also emphasized the unstable job continuity, which exacerbates workers' vulnerability. Accordingly, W7 declared: “they use you for as long as they need you, and then after that, they have no more work”. Regarding working conditions, even though workers (W2, 3, and 4) were reluctant to provide details, they expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of rights they experienced in agricultural work, as W1 stated: “some farmers take you like an animal. I don't like that”.

4.1.2 | Informal Settlements as a Workforce Reservoir

Public employment services were universally described as ineffective (F2, N1, N2, and E1). N2 highlighted the absence of recruitment through public intermediaries: “I have been doing this job here for 6 years, I have never seen a person hired through the Public Placement. Not even through the unions”. This inefficiency perpetuates reliance on informal settlements. Some informants (N1, N2, U, and E1) linked this dysfunction to the persistence of informal settlements, functioning as labor reserves. According to key informants, ghettos exist because they provide cheap labor.

4.2.2 | Legal Causes of Labor Exploitation

Legal precariousness was a key driver of labor exploitation. Informants (N1, N2, U, D3, E1) highlighted the difficulty in obtaining residence permits, which forced the victims of *caporalato* into precarious legal situations for many years. Even with contracts, many face “gray work” where declared hours and wages do not reflect reality. The unionist clearly stated this, saying that “this is recurrent: it is the norm not to count all working days”.

4.1.3 | Structural Drivers of the Caporalato System

According to key informants and secondary sources (La Repubblica 2020; Leogrande 2015), farmers rely on *caporali* for efficiency and cost reduction. According to N1: “[a farmer] goes to informal settlements, at least here, in this territory. He finds fifty people and I, a farmer, don't have to think about anything”. Expert 1 linked this dynamic to the agricultural system's focus on maximizing value from labor, also accusing the CAP of pushing farmers towards large-scale production: “You push the farmer towards large numbers, and at that point it is absolutely clear that the use of cheap labor becomes a structural element of the country's agricultural economic system”.

4.2.3 | Skill-Related Causes of Exploitation

Language barriers and limited education exacerbate exploitation, impeding the understanding of workers' rights, contractual obligations, and pay packet information, such as declared working days and wages. W7 clearly acknowledged this, claiming that “the less you know, the better they exploit you. Italy is like that. (...) Employer can do what he wants, he is free to do what he wants”.

As noted (N1, U), lack of awareness hinders compliance with fundamental labor rights. According to them, workers do not understand why they need a pay slip or a regular residence contract, which leaves them vulnerable.

4.2 | Drivers and Dynamics of Labor Exploitation

Aligned with institutional reports (Euricse 2023; Macri 2021), the findings revealed a set of common characteristics of labor exploitation, including inadequate wages, discrimination, and a lack of job security. Coherently with international reports

4.3 | Failures in Corporate and Policy Frameworks

Exploitation persists partly because of weak corporate responsibility and ineffective policy enforcement, which together create an environment that allows unethical labor practices to thrive.

4.3.1 | CSR Deficiency

Interviews revealed significant deficiencies in CSR. At the farm level, labor costs are often treated as flexible expenses. As noted by N2, irregularities are widespread. Farmers want workers to work for more than 6–7h and refuse to pay overtime or declare all working days. From a broader perspective, interviewees also debated the role of large-scale retail in putting pressure on farmers. While some informants (O1, E1) criticized its responsibility, they rejected generalizations about their sector: “from a problem, it is spread equally to all those who work in that sector, when the problem is the prerogative of some brands” (D1).

4.3.2 | Systemic Policy Inefficiency

Key informants (F1, U, D2, and E1) criticized institutional responses as inadequate, highlighting that, in some cases, the laws “sail in the opposite direction” (U), producing illegality. In general, a low level of trust has emerged in the political will to combat labor exploitation in agriculture effectively: “to date, the State cannot compete with the caporale who is able to set up work teams in no time at all, take them to the fields, and make them work” (E1).

4.4 | Challenges in Scaling NoCap's Impact

The impact of NoCap is limited by its associative nature, the small number of affiliations with farms, and the still-limited market of ethical food products. Although NoCap improves the working conditions and wages of seasonal workers, it does not enhance job continuity. Consequently, while the project expansion appears worthwhile, challenges have been identified in scaling the impact of NoCap.

4.4.1 | NoCap Resource Constraints

As noted, the main limitation of NoCap is that “the project is going through its startup phase”, consequently “on one hand the poor availability of the product and on the other the price make it a non-continuous and expensive product” (D6). NoCap's limited resources restrict the volume of products and farms involved. Therefore, NoCap is currently unable to provide large quantities to food distribution companies.

In addition, key informants (N2, U) have noted that NoCap's economies of scale are not being achieved, thus resulting in high operating costs, including transportation expenses and worker transport expenses, identified as one of the major expenses.

4.4.2 | Need for Project Expansion

Informants (F2, N1, D1, D6, and O1) expressed optimism that broader participation could strengthen NoCap's sustainability. Only through expansion can NoCap cover the cyclical nature of agricultural jobs and become stronger than *caporalato*. Retailers also declared the growth potential, observing that “consumers are constantly more and more interested” (D1)

in NoCap products, as they have developed a modest level of recognition.

4.4.3 | Working Conditions Improvement

NoCap provides fair and higher wages in line with national collective labor agreements, and regular contracts that respect workers' rights, for example by prohibiting work during the hottest hours of the summer. In apparent self-contradiction, N1 also explained that some workers deliberately choose to work irregularly for 10 or more hours a day, thereby earning higher monthly wages than they would under regular contracts and working conditions.

4.5 | Ethical and Market-Driven Corporate Strategies

NoCap encourages firms to integrate ethical principles into market strategies. A negotiation between suppliers and buyers aims to balance the value distribution, striking a balance between lower margins and reputational gains. Consequently, the collaboration follows a strategy oriented towards creating social capital. Furthermore, for food distribution companies with an ethical predisposition in their mission, NoCap represents a guarantee of reduced risk of social issues. Therefore, farms and companies aim to integrate ethics as a main value in their market-oriented communication strategies.

4.5.1 | Managing Ethical Challenges

Informants emphasized (F1, F1, N1) that ethical engagement depends on a firm's structure and values, being more feasible for well-structured firms. Firms with an existing strong ethical mission align more easily with NoCap, viewing the partnership as an extension of their communication goals. For instance, D5 explained: “we started working with NoCap because *** is historically committed to the issue of ethics” (D5). Finally, risk-based decision-making plays a crucial role, as food distribution firms recognize that fair labor certification minimizes reputational risks.

4.5.2 | Leveraging Ethical Value

Collaboration with NoCap implies lower profit margins but generates reputational benefits. D2 emphasized how “it is a question of commercial policy, of a choice that the company wanted to carry forward by giving up some margins to support the initiative” (D2). However, informants (D1 and D2) emphasize that other product qualities must complement ethical attributes. This reinforces the need for a balanced approach to ethical market positioning.

4.5.3 | Marketing Communication for Product Valorization

The need for stronger communication emerged as a key factor to increase brand awareness. According to F2, consumers should

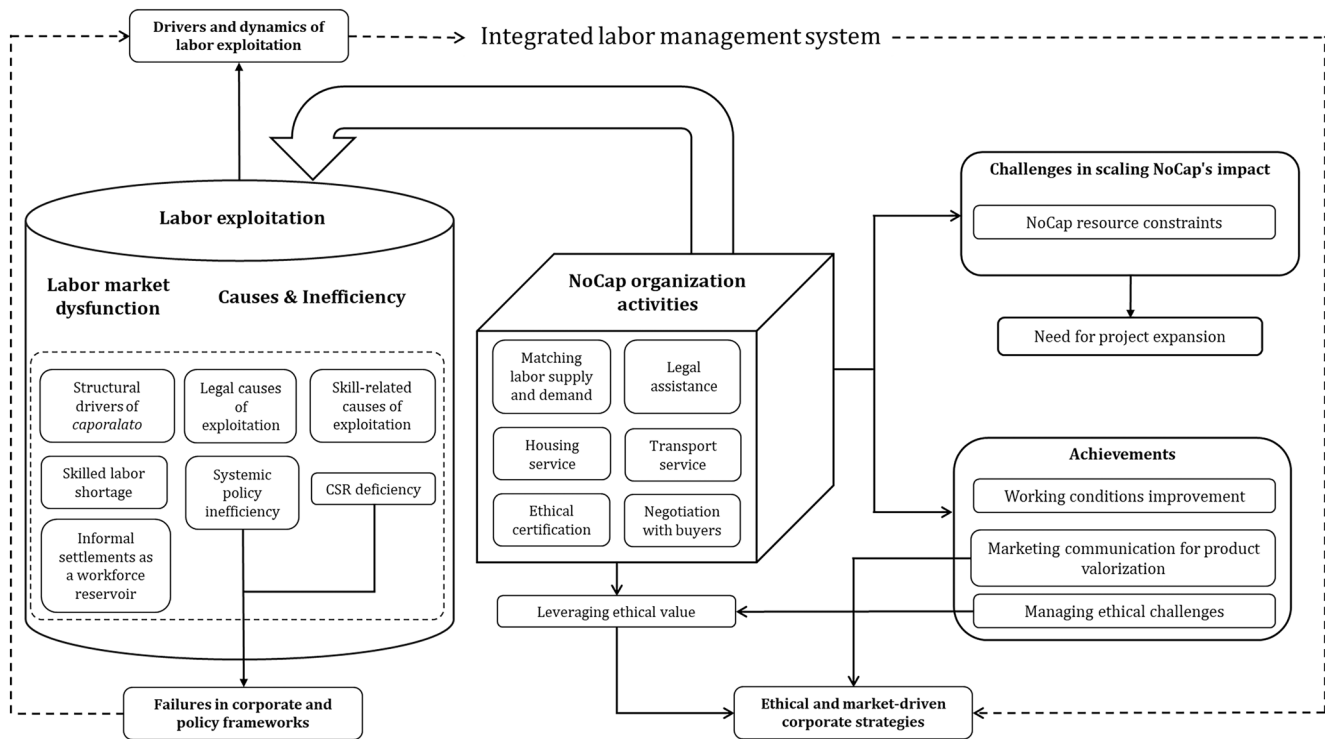


FIGURE 3 | Grounded theory model. The figures represent sets of concepts. The central cube encompasses NoCap's activities, and the arrow pointing to the left indicates their role in addressing vulnerabilities. The elements enclosed in boxes are derived from the data structure, while the dotted groupings show interconnected elements. Solid arrows represent direct relationships, while dotted external arrows represent more general connections in the model.

be given much more information before they get to the shelf with advertising campaigns. Informants (F1, D1, and O1) emphasized that the NoCap label has a moral effect on consumers. Strengthening communication can therefore improve consumer engagement and elicit ethical purchasing.

4.6 | Summarizing the Emerging Grounded Model

Figure 3 presents the grounded model conceptualized from the findings. The conceptual model illustrates how a set of labor market dysfunctions and systemic inefficiencies causes labor exploitation. The data structure reveals that these market dysfunctions encompass a shortage of skilled labor and inefficiencies in public employment services, which are ineffective and inadequate in matching labor supply with demand. Moreover, structural drivers of *caporalato* engender economic incentives for informal labor intermediation. Concurrently, the persistence of unethical labor practices is influenced by legal and skill-related causes of exploitation, as well as systemic policy and corporate inefficiencies. The interconnection between these various factors is illustrated by the dotted line surrounding them.

In response, the NoCap initiative can be defined as an Integrated Labor Management System (ILMS), as it addresses multiple dimensions of exploitation through a multifaceted intervention strategy. As NoCap and various NGOs carry out these interventions, they must be considered as independent functions. Among these, by facilitating the matching between labor supply and demand, ILMS offers an alternative to the *caporalato* system, ensuring that workers are employed through legal

channels. The ILMS also provides legal assistance, helping seasonal workers navigate regulatory vulnerabilities and reduce their risk of exploitation. It has also developed a housing service to reduce workers' dependence on informal and exploitative living arrangements, such as informal settlements. Similarly, ILMS's transport services counteract one of the primary control mechanisms used in labor exploitation, granting workers greater mobility and autonomy. Beyond labor protection, NoCap integrates an ethical certification system to enhance transparency and provide consumers with clearer information about fair labor practices. Ethical labeling allows companies to differentiate themselves by committing to socially responsible labor practices and targeting niche market segments. Furthermore, the ILMS facilitates fair negotiation processes between farms and large-scale distribution companies, ensuring more balanced economic relationships and reducing pressures that could otherwise contribute to exploitative labor conditions.

This comprehensive intervention outlined an ethics-driven strategy aimed at providing transparency regarding the company's commitment to engaging in ethical practices. Consequently, this strategy aims to enhance brand reputation at the farm and distribution levels. Additionally, considering the label potential and the need for more NoCap promotion, as well as the corporate strategies acknowledged by key informants to manage ethical challenges, the model's outcomes extend beyond improving working conditions, defining an ethical and market-driven strategy.

However, ILMS is currently facing resource constraints that limit its operational capacity. Therefore, expanding the initiative

by reinforcing the independent functions is necessary to fully meet the demands of ethical labor management and ensure that all systemic labor exploitation challenges are effectively addressed.

5 | Discussion

This study contributes to the debate on socially sustainable agricultural practices and the impact of social innovations. By examining the case of NoCap, it investigates its social and economic viability in counteracting the *caporalato* system (RQ1), and its economic sustainability for all the actors involved (RQ2). The findings indicate how NoCap's initiative can effectively improve working conditions and labor governance, although its expansion is constrained by limited resources and market scale. Beyond the specific Italian context, this study contributes to the social innovation literature by showing how multistakeholder initiatives can operate as governance mechanisms that can improve farmworkers' employment conditions.

Consistent with institutional reports (Coldiretti 2025) and prior studies (Corrado et al. 2024; Palumbo 2024), the results support the link between low-skilled labor shortages and inadequate working conditions as a critical nexus in the agricultural labor market. The sector's dependence on seasonal and migrant labor, often with irregular status, reinforces widespread precariousness (Guidi and Berti 2023; Kalantaryan et al. 2021), a pattern widely documented across agri-food systems in Europe and beyond. This condition represents a persistent vulnerability, especially for crops that require high labor intensity. The reluctance of farmers to provide regular contracts reflects a structural imbalance of power between employers and workers (Corrado et al. 2024).

From a social innovation perspective, these conditions represent the structural governance failures that such initiatives seek to transform. The findings introduce the notion of informal settlements as a "workforce reservoir", reinforcing insights by Perrotta and Sacchetto (2014) that spatial organization shapes labor processes by facilitating workforce mobilization. The proximity of these settlements to production sites enables *caporali* to allocate workers efficiently, sustaining asymmetrical relationships in a system geared towards maximizing value extraction (Brovia and Piro 2021; Castracani 2019). Coherently with Corrado et al. (2024), the *caporalato* system should be interpreted not as a deviation but as a functional component of the agricultural labor market that responds to economic pressures and labor shortages.

Within this context, the NoCap initiative constitutes a social innovation in workforce management, reconfiguring how labor is allocated, monitored, and valued across the supply chain. It encompasses regular hiring, legal and housing support, and facilitating workers' transition out of informal settlements. From a social perspective, these mechanisms improve living and working conditions by ensuring legal contracts, timely payment, and safer accommodation, compared to informal settlements (Brovia and Piro 2021). Working conditions are better in terms of salary, working hours, and contracts. However, the results suggest that farmers who have joined

NoCap are already ethically committed, which limits NoCap's actual contribution. Therefore, NoCap's impact is limited to mediating between workers experiencing legal precariousness and farms committed to ethical practices that are struggling with labor shortages, as well as monitoring the process. This highlights a core limitation of social innovations identified in the literature: their tendency to operate within niches rather than transforming dominant regimes (Avelino et al. 2019). Precarious workers with language barriers are likely to find it difficult to find regular employment, especially in critical hotspots such as Apulia. Furthermore, the initiative faces constraints. Although NoCap guarantees decent working conditions, the small number of affiliates does not improve job continuity. Agricultural work is seasonal, offering a brief window of regularity during peak periods and precariousness for the rest of the year. Moreover, while NoCap guarantees a fair hourly wage, it regulates working hours, meaning that workers outside the initiative can earn more through informal overtime. This finding aligns with Guidi and Berti's (2023) observation that certain workers may perceive short-term advantages in irregular employment.

Despite these constraints, NoCap has been recognized as best practice (Ceccarelli and Fattibene 2020; Raeymaekers 2025) and a promising model of social innovation in Italian agriculture (Palmioli et al. 2024). The case demonstrates that multistakeholder and multilevel strategies are more effective in addressing social sustainability challenges than isolated interventions. Following NoCap's model, an effective political strategy should integrate labor management, ethical disclosure, and commercial partnerships to achieve a fair value, bridging social and market dimensions of sustainability.

The grounded model developed in this study highlights NoCap's focus on mediating relationships between workers and farmers while emphasizing areas that need reinforcement. In doing so, it suggests specific actions and acknowledges limitations. Specifically, the lack of structured training and language support limits long-term employability. Additionally, the absence of organized healthcare services restricts comprehensive worker protection. Expanding these functions to training and health issues, as depicted in Figure 4, NoCap's intervention could cover two critical areas by reducing occupational risks and increasing professionalization (Caffaro et al. 2018).

The findings also reveal that addressing labor exploitation necessitates coordinated state intervention. No single non-profit initiative can reshape labor governance independently (Shirgholami et al. 2024). This confirms social innovations literature, which emphasizes that systemic impact requires institutional embedding rather than isolated experimentation. Although NoCap operates as an association, it combines advocacy with market-driven mechanisms, using ethical certification to integrate social responsibility. Following Sanzo-Pérez et al. (2024), partnerships with companies help leverage infrastructure and amplify social impact, yet the small number of participating firms still restricts market penetration. Achieving systemic transformation, therefore, requires broader institutional support at both national and local levels (Palumbo and Sciarba 2018).

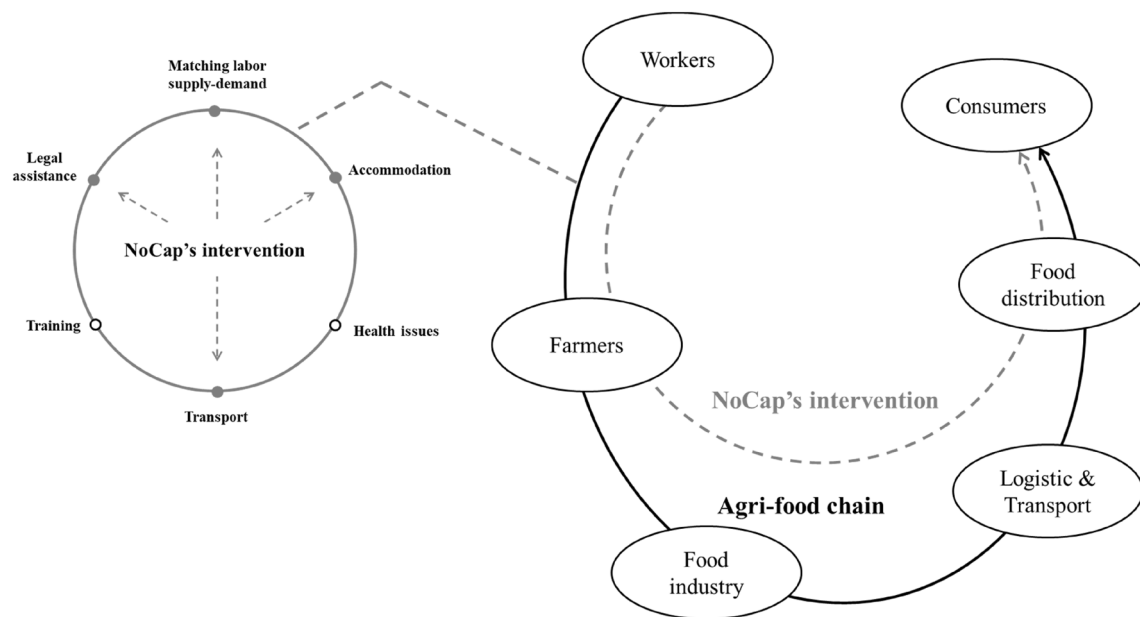


FIGURE 4 | Scope of the initiative and issues addressed by NoCap (dotted lines) in relation to the agri-food supply chain. On the left, activities covered by NoCap (filled dots) and not (empty dots).

Rather than viewing NoCap's efforts and state action as separate, this study suggests their complementarity. Hybrid governance, which combines public regulation with private social innovation, can facilitate scalable and sustainable change (George et al. 2024). This illustrates how a social innovation can 'scale up' by becoming integrated into formal regulatory frameworks. NoCap's core functions could be integrated into a formalized public framework. For example, the UK's Gangmasters Licensing Abuse Authority (GLAA) provides a regulatory model for monitoring agricultural (Schenner 2017). Institutionalizing such functions could reduce reliance on voluntary or associative initiatives and enhance stability and scalability.

The study also highlights the growing consumer interest in NoCap-labeled products, confirming the market potential of ethical labeling certification in the Italian fresh produce sector (Rossi et al. 2024). The objective of acquiring ethical value and morally influencing consumers through certification is a strategy grounded in the literature, as moral obligation is a factor influencing the intention to purchase ethical products (Berki-Kiss and Menrad 2022; Mirabella et al. 2025). Retailers are increasingly adopting risk-based strategies to mitigate reputational threats related to labor exploitation (Aktar 2013), thereby transforming their ethical commitment into a competitive advantage (Shah and Khan 2019). This aligns with evidence that consumer trust in ethical claims influences purchasing decisions (Aksoy and Özşönmez 2019; Konuk 2019).

Overall, the findings suggest that the social and market dimensions of sustainability can mutually reinforce each other. Ethical labeling, beyond improving transparency, serves as both a reputational asset and a driver of economic value in socially sensitive markets. Although NoCap aims to enhance transparency in fair labor integration, its internal auditing system entails a potential risk of conflict of interest. This risk is identified as an

analytical concern related to the auditing process, rather than as an empirically documented issue raised by key informants, as the same organization both conducts audits and owns the certification. However, similar challenges are addressed in other international experiences, such as Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), where internal monitoring is managed in a cost-effective way through the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including farmers and consumers, suggesting how internal auditing can be strengthened within multistakeholder governance models (Enthoven and den van Broeck 2023; Loconto and Hatanaka 2018).

6 | Conclusion

The issue of labor exploitation in agri-food systems remains a persistent and systemic issue, deeply embedded in the economic and institutional structures of food supply chains. Despite the legislative efforts, irregular employment, wage suppression, and caporalato continue to persist within Italian agriculture. In this context, the search for alternative governance models that can promote fair labor practices while maintaining economic viability has gained increasing importance. This study contributes to this debate by examining the NoCap initiative, an integrated workforce management model designed to contrast the caporalato system through a multifaceted strategy encompassing direct employment, legal assistance, housing, transportation, and ethical certification. The findings indicate that such an approach can support improved labor governance and transparency, although its impact is constrained by scalability limits and does not resolve work discontinuity. NoCap also seeks to promote a fairer distribution of value across the supply chain actors by negotiating pricing mechanisms that constrain the profit margins of large-scale food retailers. Participation in the initiative is motivated by companies' desire to enhance their brand reputation and align their strategies with growing consumer expectations

for ethically sourced products. The introduction of ethical certification plays a crucial role in strengthening consumer engagement. However, the risk of conflict of interest in the internal auditing process emerges as a potential critical issue that undermines transparency. Although still in its early stages, with limited market penetration, the initiative has been positively received, indicating potential for further expansion.

6.1 | Theoretical, Policy, and Managerial Implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study advances the social innovation literature by clarifying that the transformative potential of social innovations depends not only on their social objectives but also on their capacity to embed market mechanisms, coordinate diverse stakeholders, and connect with public institutions. In doing so, the study contributes to debates on social innovation scaling by identifying institutional embedding and cross-sector collaboration as key conditions for moving beyond niche interventions towards structural change in labor governance. The results of the study also enrich the literature on CSR as a strategy aimed at responding to ethical and social pressures, such as labor exploitation, by internalizing them into the company's core business. In particular, NoCap represents a case of farms that do not limit themselves to complying with minimum standards, but are actively committed to improving social well-being, achieving not only economic but also ethical and philanthropic goals.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the necessity for a multistakeholder approach to address complex and multilevel phenomena such as *caporalato*. Alongside repressive measures, such as intensified inspections, policy action should focus on structural improvements to social sustainability. The latest report of the national table on *caporalato* encourages multilevel and public-private governance mechanisms. Although current projects remain small-scale, this study confirms their value while identifying scalability as a key challenge. Furthermore, one persistent issue is the mismatch between labor demand and supply, which could be tackled through two complementary strategies: activating public employment services in critical hotspots of exploitation and adopting governance models similar to the UK's GLAA, which provides a regulatory framework for monitoring agricultural labor conditions. From a managerial perspective, the growing consumer responsiveness to ethically certified products highlights the strategic importance of social responsibility in agri-food markets. Initiatives such as "SfruttaZero"² and Coop Italia's "Buoni e Giusti"³ demonstrate how storytelling and transparent communication can enhance consumer trust and brand positioning through ethical differentiation. Similarly, international programs like Germany's Naturland Fair⁴ combine organic standards with social justice principles, offering producers a competitive edge in markets where ethical awareness is growing. These cases suggest that ethical labelling, when supported by credible narratives and third-party verification, can serve not only as a reputational asset but also as a lever to secure consumer loyalty and price premium in value-driven segments.

6.2 | Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has some limitations. First, it relies exclusively on qualitative data and does not provide quantitative measures of job quality or economic performance. Future research could integrate mixed-method approaches to assess both the social and financial outcomes. Second, the use of convenience sampling for farm workers may introduce bias by selecting participants who are more likely to take part, thereby limiting external validity and representativeness. Third, interviews with them were sometimes affected by language barriers and a reluctance to provide detailed answers. Constraining the depth of insights collected, this could be addressed by future research. Fourth, farmers and experts are underrepresented compared to other participant groups, potentially leading to skewed perspectives. Therefore, future studies should place greater emphasis on these groups to enable more in-depth analysis. Lastly, institutional mechanisms such as the Public Employment Service and the INL were discussed only by external informants. Future studies should incorporate perspectives from experts or professionals directly involved in these agencies to enrich the analysis.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the conception and design of the study. Claudio Mirabella and Valeria Borsellino performed data collection and analysis. Claudio Mirabella wrote the first draft of the manuscript, and all authors provided comments on previous versions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Disclosure

The paper demonstrates how a multistakeholder, market-based social innovation can effectively reconfigure working conditions in Italian agriculture by integrating fair labor management, ethical certification, and disclosure.

Ethics Statement

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Palermo (26/09/2024, No. 244/2024).

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. The participant has consented to the submission of the case report to the journal.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹ In terms of work ethics, NoCap only issues certification if workers have been hired under regular contracts, working hours are in line with national legislation and they are registered with INPS and have social security contributions. Certification is also granted if there is safety in the workplace, adequate healthcare and access to first aid.

² <https://www.dirittiasud.org/#sfruttazero>.

³ <https://www.coop.it/buoniegusticoop>.

⁴ <https://www.naturland.de/it/produttori/naturland-fair.html>.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Table S1:** Codes aggregation process.