

Article

Conditions for Operating in Marginal Mountain Areas: The Local Farmer's Perspective

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Abstract: Agriculture and local food products can have a significant impact on the economic development of rural areas. However, in environments as harsh as marginal mountain areas it may be difficult to find the right conditions to start a new production. This study aims to present the positive and negative circumstances for starting and operating agricultural activities in minor mountain contexts while assuming the mountain farmer's viewpoint. With reference to the Soana Valley, in the Northwestern Italian Alps, four semi-structured interviews with mountain farmers have been carried out to assess strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Preliminary results include land availability, lack of marketing skills, high level of bureaucracy and financial overexposure as the main limitations in starting new economic activity. The adoption of quality/origin labels and multifunctionality in agriculture and tourism as the end market can be considered to be potential flywheels by operators. Therefore, local policy makers can support farmers by firstly reducing land fragmentation and secondly by providing technical assistance for achieving financial funding.

Keywords: marginal areas; mountain agriculture; local food products; mountain tourism



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1. Introduction

Agricultural productivity and competitiveness have been enhanced in recent decades by specialization, intensification and technological progress. These factors have played a crucial role in shaping and boosting a process of land abandonment [1,2]. With reference to the Italian mountain context, Alpine areas are particularly marked by the typical challenges of territorial transition, having suffered the harmful effects of agricultural efficiency and an actual three-times higher risk of abandonment in favor of the attraction of urban centers [3] over non-mountain areas [4]. The process of land abandonment has led to a surplus of unused land and forgotten terraces, which were once cultivated and used but today have returned to being woodland [5–7].

Over the last several years, unfavorable economic and logistic conditions have led to a progressive reduction of mountain agriculture for self-consumption and have seen many Alpine valleys progressively transformed into areas specialized in agri-food production destined for foreign or tourism markets [8]. This new “*food neocolonialism*” from the city to the mountains [9,10] is an increasingly emerging risk also due to global warming and climate change. This process of mutual dependence is largely caused by “*the perception of the inner mountain as a set of economic, cultural, aesthetic and existential values, complementary and partially alternative to the urban*” [11].

For this reason, planning with the communities is the key factor to enhancing the territory, the culture and the opportunities that a life lived in the mountains can bring, considering new models for integrating and managing the relationship between resources and heritage [12]. The process of planning can therefore effectively identify the pros and the cons of different development strategies [13].

This paper aims to explore the local farmer's viewpoint in order to detect which aspects can favor or slow down the establishment and development of mountain agriculture

production in the Italian Alpine context, with reference to a marginal mountain community, i.e., Soana Valley. This research goal has been fostered by the local community itself where the mayor of Soana Valley's main village, Ronco Canavese, decided to investigate the conditions—needs, requirements, difficulties and constraints—for making it possible for young farmers to settle down in the area. The involvement of the local community from the very beginning of this project (the structure of the questionnaire, the kind of questions and criteria for selection farmers were defined with the local mayor of Ronco Canavese) and the area of investigation, marginal mountain regions, represent the main strong points of this study. Policy initiatives can play a role in enhancing small farming as a flywheel for marginal area regeneration. At the same time, mountain farming can indeed be a valuable tool for regeneration, providing sustainable livelihoods [14], promoting biodiversity [15–17] and traditional practices conservation [18], protecting local culture [19], supporting local food systems [20] and also stimulating and supporting local tourism [21,22].

This study, thus, aims at presenting positive and negative circumstances for starting and operating agricultural activities in secondary mountain contexts, based on the mountain farmer's viewpoint. Local farmers were involved through semi-structured interviews to discuss strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of operating in marginal regions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Mountain Agriculture

As reported by the European Association for Mountain Areas, mountain agriculture plays an important role in the overall agricultural sector, representing both 15% of the agricultural utilized area and agricultural workforce in Europe. However, in mountain regions, the work productivity is lower by 40% compared to low lands [23]. Small farming comprises the vast majority of the world's 600 million farms when considering that around 70% of all farms operate only 7% of the land devoted to agricultural purposes [24].

When considering mountain farming, reference is generally made to small farming, which is characterized by having both low input and output systems [25] and sometimes producing high-level quality foodstuff. The agricultural workforce, the size of the livestock herd, the economic production capacity and the extent of agricultural land are the elements on which the dimensions of these farming systems are calculated [24]. They generally offer a multi-variety of products and a multifunctionality of services, especially connected with the tourism sector. Small farms are usually considered as a vehicle for providing public goods, as well as preserving both cultural and natural heritage, as pointed out by Ricciardi et al. [26].

These small farms account for only about 10% of the total agricultural land in the Italian Alps, but they play an important role in preserving landscape, biodiversity and cultural heritage of the region [26–29]. Moreover, from a graph elaborated by Rossi [24] with Eurostat's farm indicators [30], it emerges that around 35% of all Italian farms have fewer than two ha, while more than 25% have from two to five ha and only 2% have greater than fifty ha.

Small-scale farming in mountains has always been characterized by its adaptability to the difficult and harsh conditions of the mountainous terrain which, for these reasons, is also defined as areas facing natural constraints (ANCs) [14].

These environments face particular problems such as temporary or permanent human migration, land abandonment and its fragmentation with the consequence of soil and landscape degradation, and the wilding of nature [31]. The difficult accessibility of villages, houses and fields and the scarcity of services and commercial activities make the life of mountain farmers even more complex. Further challenges for mountain products are represented by the consequences that the tourism market has in terms of maintaining "typical products", as well as the struggle between local consumption and exports of branded products, and by the need to rethink local identities based on cultural heritage and tradition linked with agri-food products [10,32,33].

It is worth noting that over the past few decades, the number of farms and the amount of agricultural land in the Italian Alps have declined due to various factors such as depopulation, urbanization and competition from other economic sectors. Not only has it happened to Italian farms, but European agriculture has also recently changed by reducing the number of farms, increasing their size and specializing time production [34].

As emerged from a study supported by the Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention in 2018 and reported by Gretter et al. [35], “many Alpine farms have disappeared in the last thirty years and more than half the farm managers, mostly in Italy, have given up their activities”. This phenomenon mainly involved those small farms with fewer than ten hectares [36], which are the most typically representative of mountain farms.

2.2. New Farmers’ Motivations and Barriers

As reported by Aguglia et al. [37] “new farming” can be intended as a mix of activities in addition to the fundamental meaning of agricultural ones, which consider the promotion of the natural and cultural heritage [35]. The Italian agricultural scenario is characterized by the so-called multifunctionality farms. These farms owe their existence to the successful connection and diversification between agriculture, natural resources, landscape, history and traditions with other sectors such as tourism, outdoors purposes and markets [37].

When talking about new farming and “new farmers”, we have to pay attention to the subjects, as there is no single and unique definition. The European Parliament refers to a new farmer as “a person who is no more than 40 years of age at the moment of submitting the application, possesses adequate occupational skills and competence and is setting up for the first time an agricultural holding as head of that holding” (European Parliament); whether for EUROSTAT where a new farmer is defined as a “sole holder under 35 years age” or for Mailfert [38] where new farmers are “beginning farmers, back-to-the land migrants looking for a more fulfilling lifestyle and self-decided economic success”. However, as reported by Gretter et al. [35], what the definitions have in common seems to be the reasons that lead them to approach this new lifestyle: “financial opportunities, economic duress, lifestyle aspirations, work ambitions, social aspirations and environmental aspirations”.

Very interesting research has been carried out by Creaney et al. [39] in order to focus on the difficulties and barriers that new entrants have to face and which supports and policies might help. Through an online survey across nine countries in Europe, they discovered that, differently from farms’ successors, new entrants are in need of support to overcome entry barriers in the agricultural sector in the form of financial resources and education in certain social skills [40].

New farmers are seen as important innovators and bearers of new ideas in the sector, being able to raise levels of “innovation, business sustainability and environmental protection” on farms across Europe [41].

Agricultural policies, such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and others mentioned above, together with the action of local policy makers, support small mountain farms and new farmers.

Thus, the research goal, i.e., presenting a mountain farmer’s viewpoint on the positive and negative circumstances for operating in mountain areas, has been studied in a peculiar, remote and harsh mountain area where limited research has been carried out [14,42].

Even if the conditions of operating in mountain areas have been previously analyzed, in some cases also through interviews with local farmers [43], there have not yet been studies conducted in small mountain villages in this part of the Northwestern Italian Alps, making it difficult to compare this study to similar ones.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. The Study Area

The study was carried out in the Soana Valley, a marginal mountain area in the Piedmont Region in the Northwest of the Italian Alps, which consists of three municipalities—Ingria, Ronco Canavese and Valprato Soana (Figure 1) [42]. The valley’s surface is about

182,870 km², mostly within the border of the first Italian national park, the Gran Paradiso National Park (GPNP), which covers respectively 71% and 69% of Ronco Canavese's and Valprato Soana's areas [44].



Figure 1. The study area—Soana Valley, Piedmont Region, Northwestern Italian Alps.

With a population of about 455 inhabitants and a density of 2.49 in/km², this area has been assessed as being from medium to high level in the marginality index, which ranges between -0.384 and -0.556 [45], taking into account a set of indicators equally divided into the 4 dimensions of demography, income, level of services and economic fabric.

Indeed, in 2022, the “old-age index”¹ and the “structural dependency index”² were 474.42 and 99.5, respectively, which means there are 4.74 old people for each young person and 1 non-active person for each active person.

These data show that in this specific context, population trends may play a limitative role in the territorial development. Actions taken by the local policy makers in order to foster economic activities for maintaining the young “human capital” in the valley is fundamental in the medium and long run.

In terms of economy, Soana Valley is mostly characterized by agricultural and tourism activities. Previous research has highlighted the role local food can play in boosting the tourism sector in marginal areas with reference to the Soana Valley case study [14]. In their results, Duglio et al. [14] estimated an average expenditure of EUR 22.80/person for purchasing local foodstuff under a liberal spending scenario. Even if this datum has to be considered as explorative, it has been a starting point for speculating on the role of agriculture for this mountain community.

In Soana Valley, UAA³ consists of only 684 ha and 99% is represented by permanent meadows and pastures. Thus, there are no large-cultivated areas, but three small-size companies have been devoted to the cultivation of the genepì plant for producing genepì liqueur. All the other productions (mainly vegetables and potatoes) are intended for private uses, with little economic relevance [46].

Moreover, the farmers of Soana Valley have generally not been interested in permanent livestock breeding even though there is important agricultural activity with some

1600 bovine heads and around 500 small ruminants (goats and sheep) present during the summer season, producing several typologies of mountain cheese [42,46].

Lastly, in the past few years, this area has seen an increasing interest from honey makers. In fact, in 2016, the three municipalities counted nine honey producers. The last available source (2022) reported thirty-nine honey producers, seven in Inghria, seventeen in Ronco Canavese and fifteen in Valprato Soana. It is worth underlining, however, how Only twenty-three producers are operating at a professional level, whereas sixteen are intended for self-consumption purposes and thirty-five practice nomadism for pollination by settling down apiaries in the valley at the beginning of the summer season (June).

3.2. Methodology

The study was carried out thanks to a set of semi-structured interviews with four farmers [47], coded from A to D. Semi-structured interviews are used in qualitative analysis because this kind of method foresees a predefined set of questions, helping to maintain focus on the research topic while giving both interviewers and interviewees a certain degree of liberty, encouraging communication [48]. Thanks to this method, it is possible to both collect open-ended data and comprehend interviewees' opinions and viewpoints [44]. This technique can help bypass hesitancy and reticence [49]. However, this kind of method has some limitations. Firstly, it is only able to give a qualitative picture, secondly, it is time-consuming and, lastly, the level of preparation of the interviewer plays a fundamental role in carrying out the study. This is the main reason why for each interview, three interviewers have been involved, i.e., a senior researcher and two junior scholars.

The interview contained a total of ten open questions, useful for obtaining an understanding of the reason why farmers decided to settle down: their activities, their motivations and the economic and operative processes that made it possible to start their activities. A second set of questions was devoted to gathering a picture of the ongoing productions and the market channels. The structure was first discussed with the mayor of Ronco Canavese, who provided feedback for refining the interview by adding a set of questions dedicated to the farmers' viewpoints about the role of the local communities and the local policy makers in creating the conditions for fostering agricultural-related activities in mountain areas. The complete list of the questions is presented in Appendix A.

The criteria for selected farmers, decided together with the mayor of Ronco Canavese, were:

- Operating in a similar mountain context compared to Soana Valley;
- Still in operation;
- Young farmers when their farms were started (younger than 30 years old);
- Foodstuff comparable to both typology and quantity of those produced in Soana Valley.

Being that the target is not easily recognizable and accessible, the "snowball sampling" method was chosen for selecting the participants [50,51]. After identifying the first farmer, the research team asked the respondent to indicate colleagues to recruit for carrying out the same interview. This method has been proven to help reach the study goals in several research domains such as marketing [52], agriculture [53,54] and tourism [55].

The mountain farmers were contacted by phone call to introduce the research objectives and schedule the interviews. The interviews were carried out on their farms between December 2022 and February 2023, as reported in Table 1:

The length of the interviews varied between 2 and 3.5 h. As mentioned, three interviewers took part in this phase: the senior researcher's role was to conduct the interviews, while the two junior scholars took notes separately in order to compare the most prominent issues afterwards. Furthermore, all the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Each of the four semi-structured interviews was analyzed using SWOT analysis. SWOT is a tool developed in the 1950s, and it is widely used in strategic management and planning. It allows the analysis of an organization, a project or an activity from an internal and external point of view using a matrix that contains its strengths, weaknesses,

opportunities and threats [42,56]. Thus, SWOT has been used for organizing the farmers' opinion on the topics of the above mentioned four categories. Recurrent themes were also collected in a final SWOT analysis table, which aggregates the evidence provided by the interviews.

Table 1. Local farmers who took part in the study and their location.

Farm	Interview Date	Location
Trigo Agricoltura	22 December 2022	Sparone Orco Valley Metropolitan Area of Torino
La Cantella	22 December 2022	Borgiallo Sacra Valley Metropolitan Area of Torino
Paysage à Manger	18 January 2023	Vigliano Biellese Biella Province
Sorelle Facciotti	14 February 2023	Boccioleto Sermenza Valley Vercelli Province

Figure 2 reports the research steps and the methodological approach.

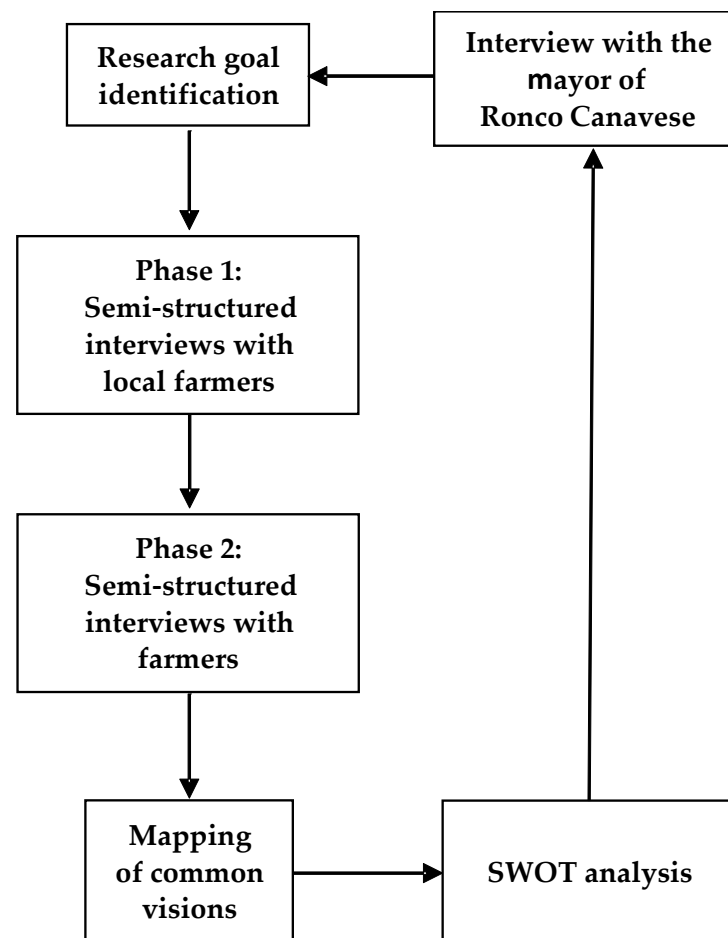


Figure 2. The methodological approach: definition of the research question, phases, SWOT analysis and evidence for local policy makers.

4. Results

Table 2 details the SWOT analysis for all the farmers involved in the research by identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Table 2. SWOT analysis—Specific indications provided by Farmers A, B, C, D.

Farmer A	
Strengths	Weaknesses
Knowledge of the area Associations/Institutions	Land availability High costs Lack of business skills
Opportunities	Threats
Land association Technical support Emergent sectors Niche product Processing laboratory	Land fragmentation Land abandonment Lack of local shop Weak identity Overworking
Farmer B	
Strengths	Weaknesses
Organic farming label Seasonal memberships Product booking Processing laboratory Personal contact with customers	High costs and risks Lack of support from authorities Lack of a network Lack of business skills
Opportunities	Threats
Farmers' network Cross-sectoral projects Local shop/e-commerce Chain value projects Support in technical aspects	Unfair competition Seasonality Personal dynamics
Farmer C	
Strengths	Weaknesses
Communication strategy Networks/associations Cross-sectoral projects	Fossilized mentality Financial overexposure Land availability Quality labels
Opportunities	Threats
Support in land acquisition Communication strategies Local network Scientific research	Fast innovation Local origin labels
Farmer D	
Strengths	Weaknesses
Product diversification Innovation Networks Non-local markets Social networks	Lack of support from authorities Lack of legal knowledge High costs Quality/origin labels Lack of a network
Opportunities	Threats
Cross-sectional projects Technical support E-commerce	Rising costs Unfair competition Habits

Farmer A claimed that a strong knowledge of the area and its dynamics is important to starting a small business and to be accepted by the local community. Moreover, he stressed the advantage of collaborating with local companies, associations and institutions—e.g., the Gran Paradiso National Park—to be involved in their projects and gain more visibility.

Among the weaknesses, Farmer A considered land accessibility to be one of the highest barriers to starting farm in a mountain area. In addition, he mentioned the high initial costs and a general lack of business skills planning among farmers.

As far as the opportunities are concerned, Farmer A suggested a series of interventions from local authorities to improve the current situation for small farmers: the creation of a land association, technical support, the active promotion of emergent sectors and the construction of a local processing laboratory. Moreover, he claimed that small producers should focus on a niche product to boost the efficiency of communication and marketing.

Finally, Farmer A identified as the main threats the current land abandonment, the lack of a shop/e-commerce for local products, a weak valley identity and the risk of overworking from producing too many different products.

The main strengths highlighted by Farmer B include the use of organic certification, considered an economic advantage and a device to strengthen customer loyalty, and a personal relationship with customers enhanced by a continuous product offer during the whole year. Moreover, Farmer B stressed the importance of expedients to gain liquidity and reduce waste, such as seasonal memberships, weekly product bookings and a processing laboratory.

Among weaknesses, Farmer B listed the high costs and risks of production, a lack of technical knowledge in the bureaucratic and economic sector, weak support from the local authority and the absence of a farmers' network.

The opportunities and improvements proposed by Farmer B include the promotion of a network from the local administration, public support in bureaucracy, the development of supply chain and intersectoral projects and the opening of a shop/e-commerce for local products.

The main threats, for Farmer B, are unfair competition from big producers, lack of continuity in production due to seasonality which could result in customers loss, and the negative sides of informal personal relationships in small villages.

Farmer C considered a good communication strategy to be a fundamental element for the success of a small business. For this reason, strong contact with media should be maintained. Moreover, Farmer C stressed the importance of being part of a network or an ethic association such as Slow Food [57], as well as being able to work with other sectors such as food service.

Farmer C claimed that the main problems in mountain areas are land accessibility and financial overexposure. In addition, he argued that these territories are often characterized by a fossilized mentality and are not open to changes. Another weakness of being a small producer concerns optional quality labels. Farmer C stated that since they have become too mainstream and easy to obtain, they often lead to a lack of credibility among consumers.

Farmer C's opinion regarding opportunities includes public authorities' support in land accessibility and in financing communication strategies, development of a local ethic network and a collaboration with scientific researchers to validate the efficiency of new farming methods.

Among threats for small farmers, Farmer C highlighted the risks of introducing innovations without adequate previous knowledge or sufficient resources and the limits of local optional origin labels, which could become a form of local protectionism.

Farmer D stressed the positive aspects of product diversification and innovation, as well as the importance of a good communication strategy on social media. Moreover, he claimed that being part of an international network such as Slow Food would be an opportunity to expand towards non-local markets and improve positive contamination among producers.

Among the main weaknesses, Farmer D pointed out land fragmentation, non-collaborative local authorities and difficulties in obtaining financial aid due to a lack of knowledge of incentive laws. Moreover, Farmer D claimed that quality optional labels are not useful in the mountain area but rather only in non-local markets.

Future opportunities are represented by product diversification and cooperation with other sectors such as tourism, as well as support from local authorities in technical aspects. In addition, Farmer D positively approved of the idea of e-commerce for local products.

Lastly, Farmer D considered a major threat to be the rise in costs of raw materials and rent. In addition, they argued that among small producers it is often hard to change old habits and that unfair competition in price is common.

Aggregated Results

Starting with individual interviews, a final SWOT analysis was carried out, highlighting the common aspects divided into four categories as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Aggregated SWOT analysis: Local farmers' shared aspects.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Communication Networks/associations	Land availability Financial overexposure Quality/origin labels
Opportunities	Threats
Local farmers' network Technical support Communal processing laboratory Capacity building Quality/origin labels	Land abandonment Personal dynamics

All farmers highlighted the positive impact of a good communication strategy and the support and promotion that could be gained through quality and origin labels. Moreover, it emerged from the analysis that the main problems in operating in mountain areas were land availability and financial overexposure. It appears that there is a common desire for a local farmers' network and a communal processing laboratory. For these initiatives, producers demand the administration's support, as well as support in technical and legal aspects. All interviewees positively valued training initiatives in communication and marketing. Lastly, major threats highlighted by all four farmers consisted of land fragmentation and abandonment and in toxic personal dynamics that can flourish in small mountain villages.

5. Discussion

The SWOT analyses provided a better understanding of the local farmers' perspectives, delineating the main difficulties and strength points in operating in mountain villages.

For several reasons, all farmers stressed the importance of being part of a network or an association and working with institutions. This first consideration is consistent with previous studies carried out in the same area that underlined the importance of integrating agriculture and tourism in a shared development strategy [42]. Firstly, being in a network would make them feel that they can rely on mutual help and organize common initiatives by sharing organizational issues. Moreover, the sharing of ideas among farmers fosters innovation, resulting in improvements in farmers' economic conditions and in higher product quality.

"Everything that I ship is requested through Slow Food, mainly by restaurants. I must admit that it's a great market. [. . .] You understand that you need to evolve. [. . .] I was lucky to become part of the Slow Food presidium and go around different markets. I went to Trentino, Veneto and so on, I talked with other farmers, and I understood something."

(Farmer D)

Innovation and improvement can also be achieved through cross-sectoral projects, such as a collaboration with the tourism sector [14,58], and diversification, which can result in market expansion. A tool for diversification mentioned by several farmers is the construction of a processing laboratory. Other than enabling diversification, a laboratory can also help farmers to reduce waste.

“You should offer something to your customers for the whole year. We wanted to have a continuous production and sell, to diversify. [. . .] We built the laboratory for that reason. Besides, if you have too much product or fruits that are too small or ugly, it is better to transform them rather than throw them out.” (Farmer B)

Associations and institutions also cover an essential role in business development of small farmers. In fact, thanks to their work, small producers can take part in bigger projects, gaining knowledge and visibility.

Promotion—and consequently communication—is indeed another central issue in the farming sector. All the interviewees agree that a good communication strategy is fundamental for small businesses. Efficient communication is a tool for gaining potential customers, which could be an issue in small mountain areas. Moreover, it can be used to build a long-term relationship with customers.

“The most important thing is the relationship with people. You must guide people around your field, show them how you work” (Farmer B)

Regarding promotion and communication, quality and origin labels emerged from the research as a contested tool. Some certification labels, such as the European Union’s organic certification [59] or Slow Food Presidium [55], were judged positively by farmers since they require products to reach strict quality standards and are widely recognized by consumers. However, they are considered more useful when selling outside of mountain areas, because local customers take for granted the organic nature of products. This often happens with the EU label “Mountain Product”, which is considered by the interviewees a strategic marketing tool only in city markets. However, the general opinion on the label is positive and is in line with previous studies [60]. Farmers’ opinion on optional local labels are also contrasting, mainly because they could result in self-referentiality and harmful protectionism.

Among the main difficulties, all farmers highlighted severe land fragmentation in mountain areas, which cause difficulties both in finding proper land to start the business and later to expand it. For this reason, the producers demand an intervention by the local authorities, mainly by suggesting the creation of a land consolidation association. Projects of land consolidation associations have already been carried out in the Piedmont Region, proving themselves to be a successful tool for overcoming fragmentation [49,61]

“The first thing, which is a problem for the whole Western Alpine arc, is land fragmentation. [. . .] It’s a massive problem and it’s not just my problem, it involves the whole rural and marginal realities, small businesses. That’s why Regione Piemonte came up with the idea of land associations.” (Farmer A)

“In my opinion, the focal point of what a local administration can do is to pave the way for land access.” (Farmer C)

The other major issue pointed out by all farmers is represented by the significant costs of starting and developing farming businesses. Since the establishment of the farm, onerous investments are required, resulting often in indebtedness and financial overexposure.

“I know virtuous businesses that are neck-deep in debts, you can’t live like that, no way. One of the huge limits of agriculture is financial overexposure. It’s a fundamental issue” (Farmer C)

Moreover, most farmers are not trained in business management and often struggle to find financial aid and adapt to their requirements.

“What we didn’t know before was to do the paperwork. You must understand I didn’t know what an invoice is.” (Farmer D)

For this reason, they are often forced to pay for private consultancy. Interviewees suggested different solutions, such as a public office dedicated to technical consultancy on agribusiness or capacity-building initiatives promoted by the local administration.

6. Conclusions

Local operators’ viewpoints on mountain farming in marginal areas revealed several difficulties and constraints that need to be faced in starting and maintaining business activities over time. If, on the one hand, land fragmentation/availability and financial overexposure represent the main reasons for limiting mountain farming, on the other hand, the creation of networks with local communities and devoted tools as quality/origin labels can play an important role in sustaining new farmers. These results are in line with previous studies dealing with these themes, contributing to increasing knowledge in this topic [14,42,49,58,60,61].

Thus, this contribution is firstly intended to give evidence to local policy makers on the main actions that can be carried out to support new farmers in starting and developing economic activity in mountain regions. In more detail, a solution to the land fragmentation phenomenon may come about by promoting the creation of a land association; furthermore, providing technical support to local farmers and promoting local production through local origin labels might be the additional elements necessary for sustaining local farmers. Secondly, this study offers some hints to the farmers themselves on the problems that they may face in operating in marginal mountain areas. It is the authors’ opinion that this research has some strength that should be underlined. A first strong point is the involvement of the local community and, in particular, of the local mayor from the very beginning of the research activity in the planning of the methodological approach. In addition, the area of investigation, which is a social-economically secondary mountain area, can be considered a second strong point of the research, being a quite common condition of several Alpine communities in the Northwestern Italian Alps. As a consequence, the evidence provided by this study may be replicated in other similar mountain contexts.

This research paper contains some limitations as well. These limitations can be considered in the meantime as new potential avenues of research. The main limitation has to be the number of the participants involved in the research (i.e., four mountain farmers). Moreover, as mentioned, this contribution referred to a specific context, in the Northwestern Italian Alps, with some peculiarities (i.e., land fragmentation) that may differ compared to other Italian or European mountain regions. In this sense, the replicability of this analysis in other mountain ranges could lead to the comparison of strong points and difficulties among different areas and also verify how they have been faced (or are facing) by local communities in a more comprehensive way.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured interview questions

1. Where did the idea of starting the farm come from and what were the main reasons that led you to make this decision?
2. How did you start the business from both an economic and operational point of view? (Searching for funding, choice of location and product)
3. What are your current productions?
4. What is your target market and what is the geographical scope of your market?
5. What are your main sales channels? What role does technology play for you in sales (e.g., e-commerce)?
6. What allowed you to grow and what innovations have you brought within a traditional business such as farming?
7. What have been the main difficulties?
8. In mountain areas and in inner areas in general, the role of the local community is often fundamental, resulting at times in the creation of local associations and consortia. What is your relationship with the territory? Do you cooperate with other companies?
9. Another topic that is frequently addressed when talking about starting a new business is support from the local administration. Do you think that the role of the administration has been decisive for you? In what ways?
10. In the agribusiness sector, an important role is played by quality and protection labels. Do you use any of these tools? What role have they played within the company's growth?

Notes

- ¹ The ratio between old population—more than 65 years old—and young population—between 0 and 14 years old.
- ² The ratio—between inactive population—more than 65 years old and between 0 and 14 years old—and active population—between 15 and 64 years old.
- ³ Utilized Agricultural Area.

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