

**Sustainable Economies Due diLigence:
good EXamples and the role
of social dialogue**

**COVALPA
Italy**

CASE STUDY
AGRICULTURE AND FOOD INDUSTRIES

PROJECT NO. 101126464

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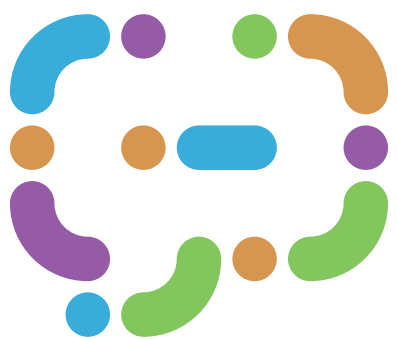
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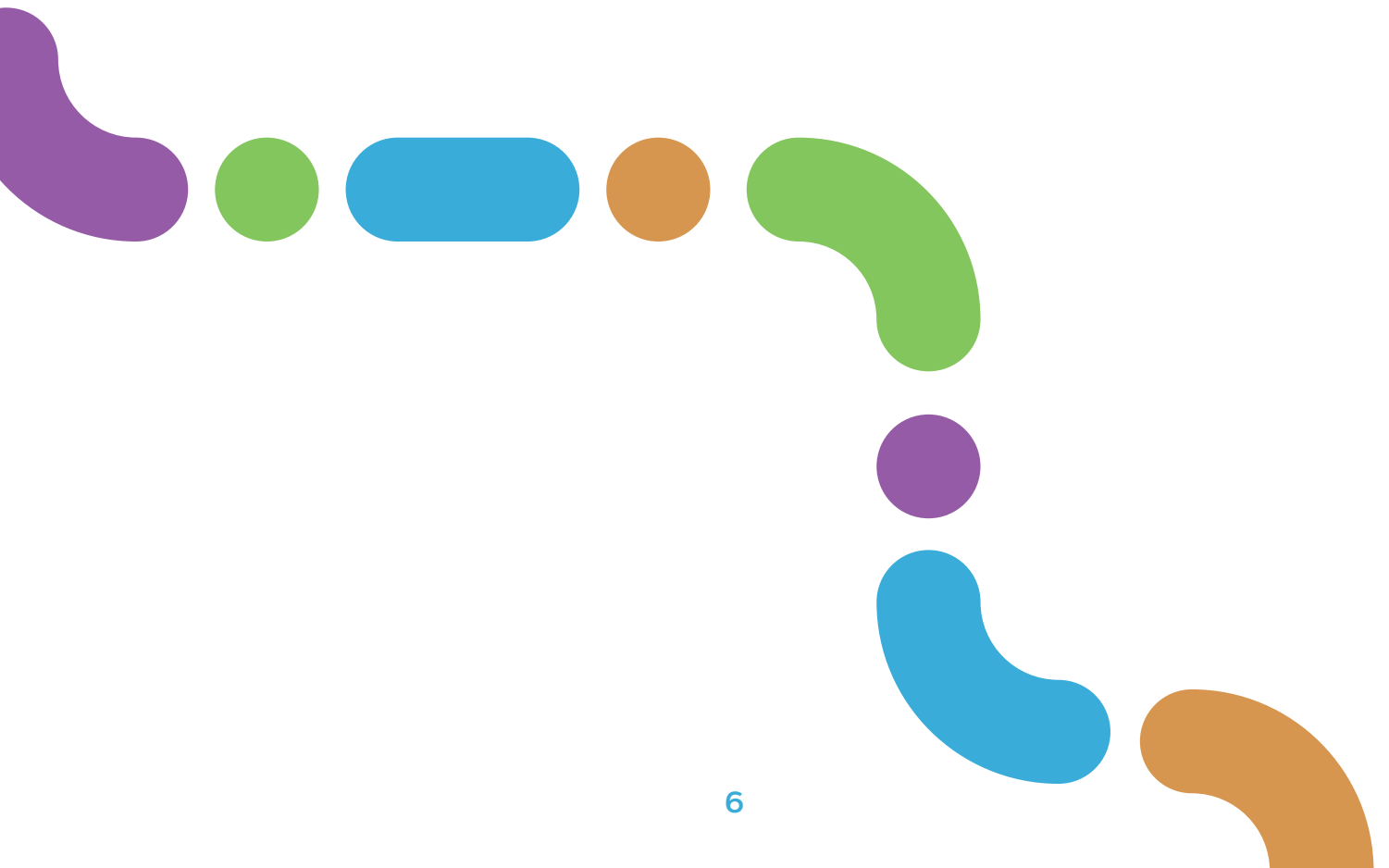
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01

Organisational model and legal status



Case study: COVALPA – Italy

Associazione Co.Val.P.A., officially known as “Abruzzo Consorzio Valorizzazione Produzione Agricole Abruzzo” (COVALPA) is an agricultural producers’ organisation based in Celano, Italy.¹ It is legally registered as an agricultural cooperative society under Italian law, and recognised as a producers’ organisation under Italian and EU law. Since it brings together agricultural cooperatives, it is legally registered as a consortium for the valorisation of agri-food production.

Today, it consists of 152 producers, grouped into eight cooperatives, located in the Fucino plain in Abruzzo, an ancient lake bed some 140 square kilometres in size, that was drained in the 19th century and consists of highly fertile soils. Through the joint efforts and commitment of certified farmers every day, quality vegetables are grown and harvested, carefully selected and processed in its factory. As of 30 June 2025, COVALPA employed a total of 261 workers, distributed as follows: 3 executives, 9 middle managers, 14 white-collar employees, 32 blue-collar workers, and 203 seasonal or other workers. This represents an increase from 191 total workers during the 2022-2023 agricultural season, with a corresponding personnel cost of €4.95 million, compared to €5.82 million in 2024-2025.²

COVALPA is a member of the Marsicana Association of Potato Producers (*Associazione Marsicana Produttori*

di Patate, AMPP).³ AMPP uses technological and industrial innovation to improve the quality and safety of food products. It was established in 1985 and has a membership of 350 contributing producers and 10 cooperatives.

COVALPA and Agrifood Abruzzo Srl together make up a group that includes over 2,000 small producers in the Fucino plain.

COVALPA's mission is to guide its member companies and end consumers towards a more responsible way of living and consuming. It sees itself as a spokesperson for a new mindset and a sustainable approach, in a world where resources are now recognised as limited.

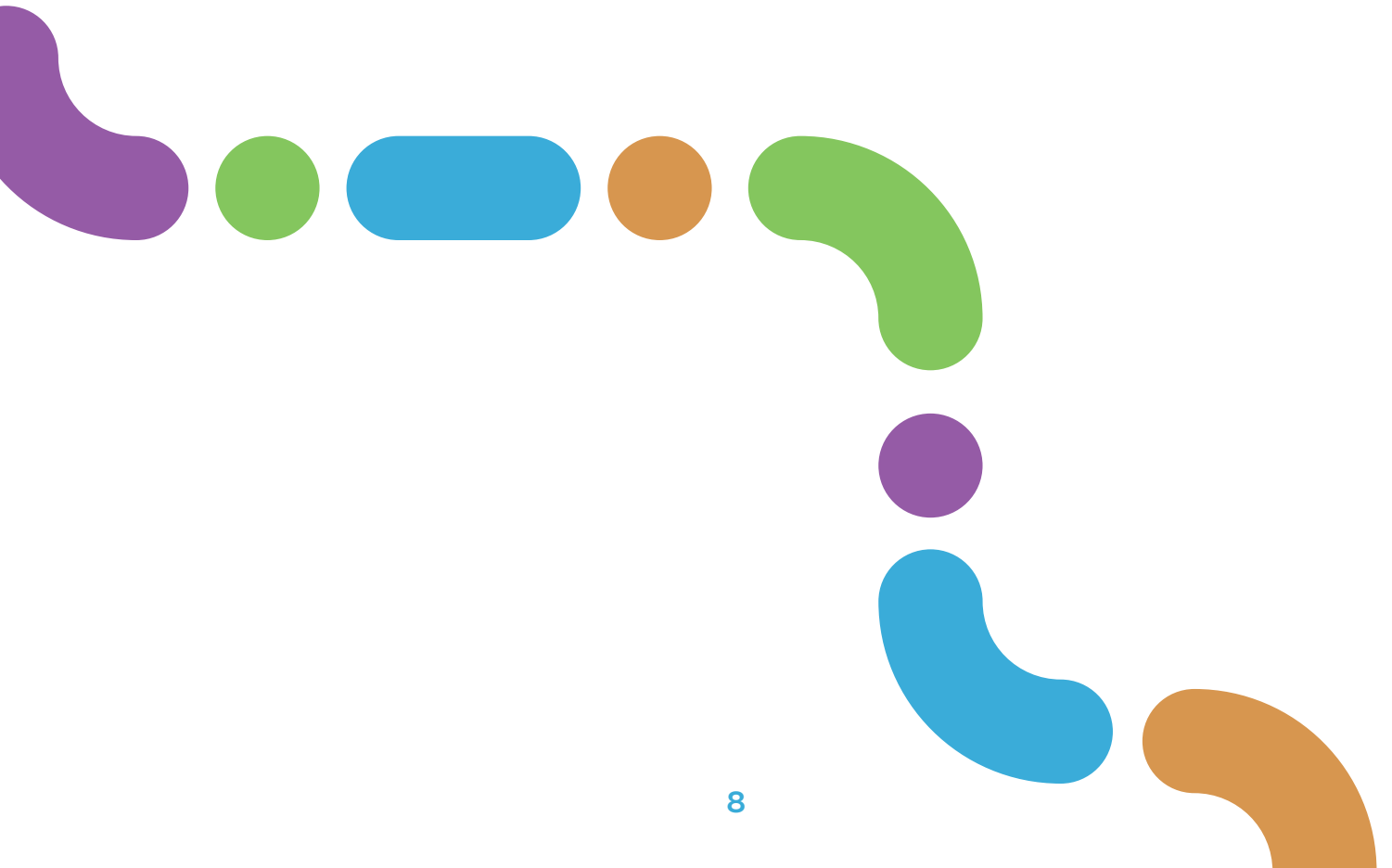
1 Source: www.covalpabruzzo.it/organizzazione (retrieved 18.06.2025)

2 Due to the seasonality typical of the agricultural sector, the number of individual workers employed should not be confused with the number of full-time equivalents (AWU). For example, one permanent employee equals 1 AWU, while a seasonal worker employed for half the year equals 0.5 AWU.

3 Source: <https://www.ampp.it> (retrieved 18.06.2025)

02

Background of the company



Case study: COVALPA – Italy

The site in which COVALPA operates is located about 3 km from Celano, on the edge of the Fucino plain in Marsica, in the province of L'Aquila. The area is predominantly agricultural and grows crops typical of continental climates and light, fresh and fertile soils: the main products are carrots, spinach and potatoes, which are followed in importance by celery, chicory, cabbage and various other vegetables.

COVALPA provides two sorts of assistance to its members: both agronomic – to protect plants and improve production by experimenting with alternative crops and innovative cultivation techniques – and fiscal, administrative, accounting and legal advice. It buys in some products from third parties to complete its range.

The processing and deep-freezing of products takes place in its factory at Celano, on the northern edge of the plain, where it is easily accessible from all over the surrounding area. The plant spans 110,000 square metres and is equipped with washing lines and cold-storage rooms capable of maintaining constant temperatures and humidity. It also has a state-of-the-art purification plant that complies with all relevant regulations.

Since 1994, COVALPA has operated as a producers' organisation, providing a firm guarantee of a short supply chain and products that can be traced from harvest to consumption. All the choices made in the growing, harvesting, processing, freezing and packaging of its products are aimed at keeping their organoleptic qualities – taste, appearance, feel and smell – and vitamin and mineral content as unaltered

as possible, thus allowing the consumer to bring to the table the best of Italian agriculture for a healthy, balanced diet, rich in all the nutrients necessary for the body's health and well-being.

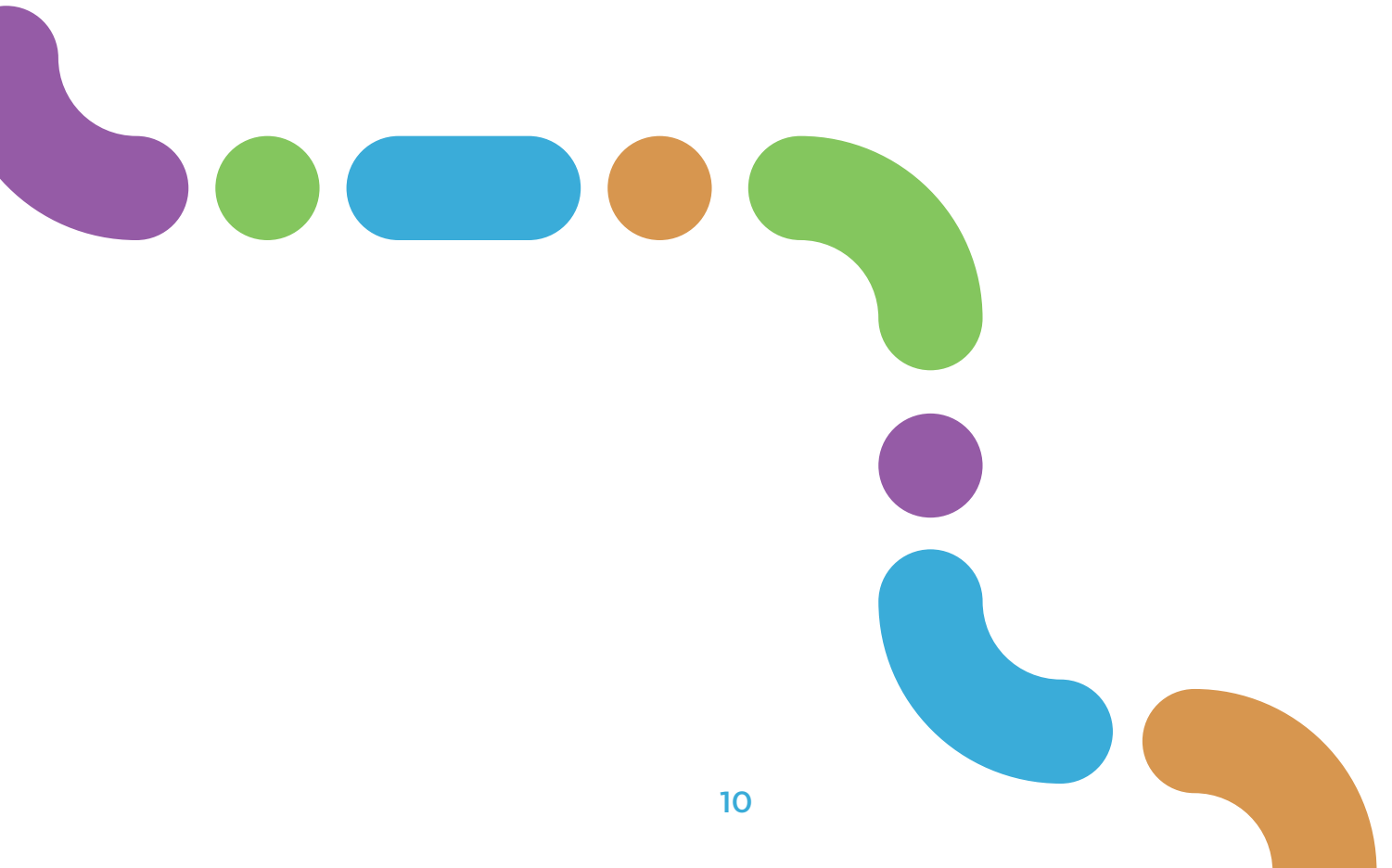
Recognising the vast potential of the Fucino area, the cooperative has sought to highlight this region of Abruzzo as a guardian of a rich agricultural tradition. Over the years, the quality of cultivation and products has increased considerably.

Starting in 2019, an expansion phase began with the doubling of the area of the COVALPA and Marsicana Association of Potato Producers' plants. The surface area of the plants will be extended to 24 hectares by bringing the former Celano sugar mill into use, enabling the doubling of the vegetable processing and storage plant, and adding state-of-the-art cold rooms, new equipment and more space.

This will bring annual production capacity up to 30,000 tons.

03

Corporate sustainability due diligence (CSDD)



Case study: COVALPA – Italy

The principles of sustainability are part of the association's DNA, ever since COVALPA decided in 1992 to commit to protecting and promoting horticultural products. 2024 was a year of significant progress in COVALPA's business development, despite the consumer market's being rocked by the international crises that have led to particularly aggressive inflation in all production chains, due in particular to the increase in energy costs.

Although this scenario is not favourable, COVALPA has continued along the path it has undertaken by investing in the development of the agri-food chain. As outlined in its **sustainability reports** for 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 (the latter is not available to the public, but the COVALPA website provides general information on its sustainability practices), the pivotal pillar has been to embed and concretely implement the principles of sustainable development, from the setting of objectives to the identification of operational tools to ensure the association's business continuity, with due regard for its guiding role for members and associates.

Thanks to its efforts to implement environmental, social, and governance (ESG) policies, aimed at improving its impacts in these three spheres to foster business sustainability, the association's commitment was positively evaluated by an external assessment body, Bureau Veritas Italia S.p.A.⁴ In August 2022, Bureau Veritas carried out an ESG due diligence audit on all corporate processes. Two years later, the organisation is pressing forward with conviction to continuously improve its performance

in environmental and social sustainability and to strengthen its governance and compliance with laws, regulations and consumer protection.

COVALPA views its sustainability report as the main tool for reporting on objectives achieved and future trajectories in the environmental, social and governance fields. The report has been drafted in line with the **Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive** (CSRD) adopted in 2021 by the European Commission, which amended the regulatory framework on non-financial reporting obligations for listed and public interest companies that had been in force in Italy since 2016. In this document, the co-operative underlines the fundamental transparency of non-financial information provided to all stakeholders. External and internal factors were taken into account in assessing the company's context and framework, analysed according to what was identified within the political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental (PESTLE) systems.

The elements taken into consideration therefore concern aspects of social responsibility, ethical business conduct, responsibility and legislative compliance. To organise its corporate sustainability management system in an integrated way, aligned with its existing systems for food safety and environmental management, the company developed a three-phase procedure:

- 1) identification and assessment of the relevance of context factors;
- 2) identification of stakeholders and analysis of their needs and expectations;

⁴ Source: <https://www.bureauveritas.it/> (retrieved 18.06.2025)

3) identification of aspects and obligations arising from the context and stakeholders.

In addition, **COVALPA adopted the following documents** in which its approach to corporate sustainability is embedded:

- ✦ code of ethics
- ✦ sustainability policy
- ✦ food safety and environment policy
- ✦ social accountability policy SA 8000 2014
- ✦ anticorruption policy

These documents are the result of synergetic work between the organisation and its member producers, who, according to the cooperative, are the real protagonists of change. For them, total quality, food safety, product certification, integrated pest management, environmental protection, food traceability, and the non-use of genetically modified organisms are not mere words but a constant reminder of the commitment that COVALPA has made to consumer protection.

As a cooperative, COVALPA aims to generate **strong commitment from staff, members and consumers** through better conditions in different fields. The new highly automated facility with 'Industry 4.0' technology will be used for the storage of frozen finished and semi-finished products, and its value also lies in the fact that it was built on the site of the former SADAM sugar factory.

The new agro-industrial site, which has been realised thanks to regional funding from the Rural

Development Plan as well as funding from MASAF (the Ministry of Agriculture, Food Sovereignty and Forests) under the Contracts for Supply Chains and Districts programme, required a total investment of over €50 million and covers an area of approximately 11,700 square metres. It is equipped with a collective air-conditioning system for semi-processed and packaged frozen vegetables, a logistics area for loading and unloading, an engine room, and all other facilities needed for its perfect operation.

The impact, in terms of tangible benefits, has been substantial: **production has more than doubled**, rising from 19,000 tons a year in the pre-COVID period to 40,000 tons in 2024. All this could lead to lower operating costs and greater efficiency in the supply chain, a virtuous way of combining competitiveness and sustainability. This is a useful response to the critical situation in the agricultural market caused by the wars in Ukraine leading to demand and supply shocks, and rising producer and consumer prices.

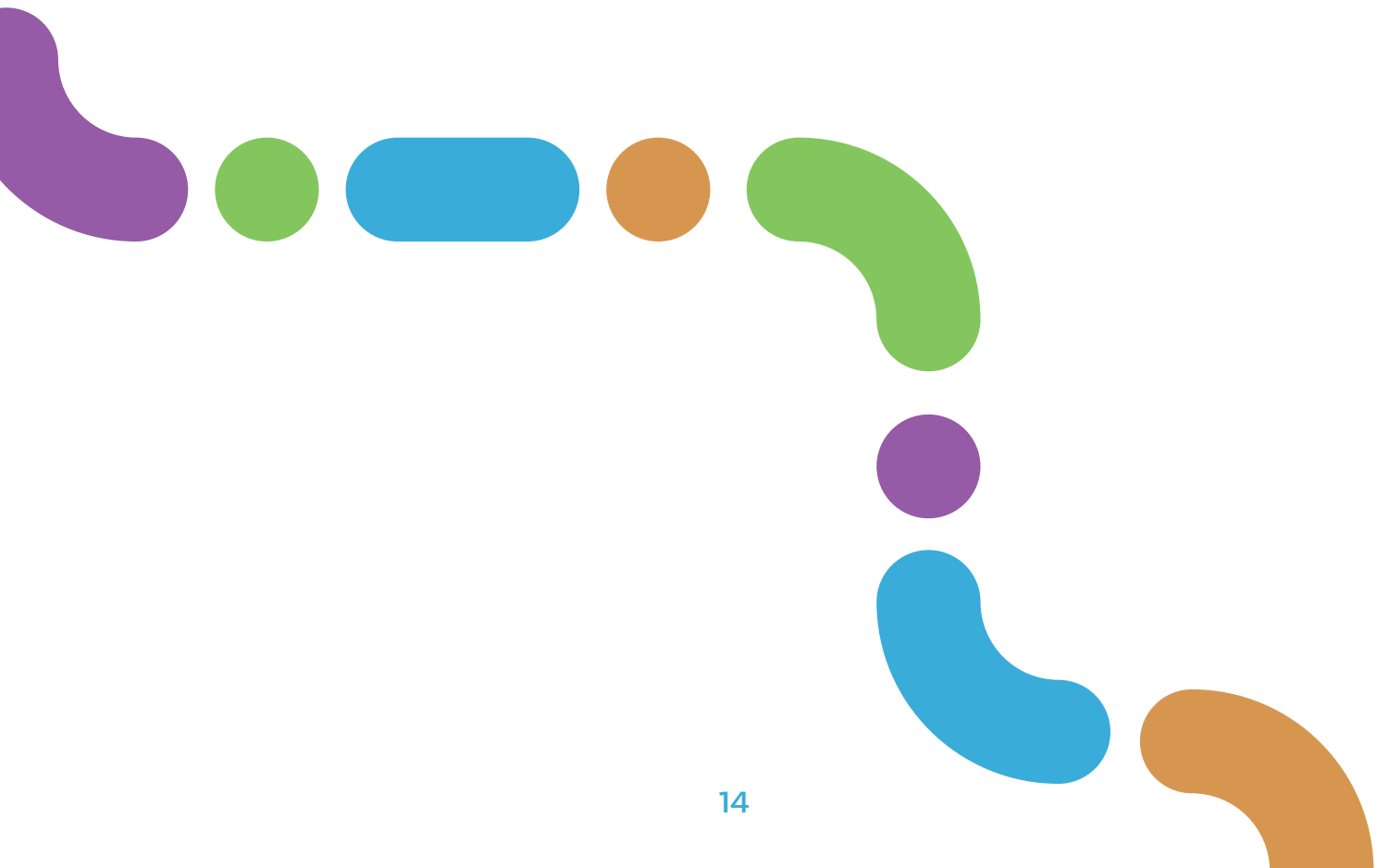
In collaboration with Agrifood Abruzzo Srl, COVALPA markets a wide range of frozen vegetables grown in the Fucino basin, rich in nutrients absorbed from the soil, such as nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. COVALPA's range of frozen vegetables includes potatoes, spinach, chard, chicory, fennel, endive, celery and cabbage, as well as the famous Fucino carrot – a product with protected geographical indication (PGI) which is particularly rich in vitamins and brightly coloured. Some of the vegetables offered by Agrifood COVALPA also come from other areas of central Italy, so that consumers can be sure of a wide range of products. Early fruit comes from the sunny

Case study: COVALPA - Italy

cultivations of Apulia, while other vegetables come from the fertile plains of Marche and Lazio.

04

Social dialogue



Case study: COVALPA – Italy

COVALPA operates as a **cooperative producers' organisation**, where governance is grounded in democratic participation and member accountability. The **general assembly**, composed of the member cooperatives, is the highest decision-making body and approves strategic directions, annual plans and financial reports. Each member has one vote, regardless of economic size, in line with cooperative principles.

The **board of directors** is elected by the general assembly and is responsible for day-to-day governance, strategic oversight, and managing relations with Agrifood Abruzzo Srl and institutional partners. Board meetings are held regularly and involve cooperative members in defining priorities, especially regarding sustainability, innovation, and supply chain integration.

The cooperative maintains **open channels of communication with its members** through regular consultations, working groups, and feedback mechanisms. Staff and producers are also represented through consultative bodies and technical committees, which support the implementation of decisions related to production quality, food safety, and compliance with collective labour agreements.

The relationship with Agrifood Abruzzo Srl, the company operating the processing facility, is governed through operational agreements and representation in **joint coordination bodies**. This ensures that business decisions remain aligned with the cooperative's values and long-term vision.

The company declares that it respects all **national labour laws**, to fully and correctly apply the **collective agreements** for the sector and to **welcome any trade union initiatives** that may be put forward by its employees, encouraging the expression of the workers' different points of view as a fundamental contribution to solving problems.

As a cooperative, COVALPA focuses on the representation and participation of workers as well as its producer- members, who are involved in the management of the cooperative through various initiatives. In the case of COVALPA, two aspects may be underlined:

- ✦ Relationship with trade unions: in 2019, a company agreement was concluded between COVALPA and the trade unions FLAI-CGIL, UILA-UIL and FAI-CISL. This agreement aims to guarantee employment stability and professional growth, in response to the development and expansion of production, including investments in innovative equipment and technologies;

- ✦ **Active participation** is fundamental to the cooperative model: producer-members play a key role in decision-making and strategic planning. This includes oversight of product quality, food safety, and environmental sustainability. The cooperative actively promotes sustainable agricultural practices, such as crop rotation and efficient water resource management, to minimise environmental impact and ensure long-term viability.

The **participatory bodies** of COVALPA include both employees and members, and have the mission to:

- 1) promote sustainability: implement agricultural practices that respect natural resources and workers' welfare, contributing to the long-term sustainability of the cooperative;
- 2) ensure quality and food safety: ensure that products meet high standards of quality and safety through certification and rigorous controls;
- 3) promote employee inclusion and welfare: develop corporate welfare programmes that promote employee welfare, as highlighted in the 'S-Loan' ESG funding received from Intesa Sanpaolo, which includes indicators related to corporate welfare.

In summary, COVALPA adopts a **cooperative governance model** that integrates the active participation of workers and members with a strong commitment to sustainability.

The cooperative also complies with the legislation on **health and safety in the workplace** (legislative decree 81/2008 as amended), and adopts all the necessary tools to ensure a healthy and safe working environment for its employees, and for its stakeholders in general.

COVALPA ensures full compliance with national labour laws and international labour standards regarding **decent work and workers' rights**. The organisation explicitly rejects any form of coercion, forced labour, or irregular employment practices. These commitments

are embedded in its internal personnel policies and reflected in all stages of the employment relationship, from recruitment to contract termination.

The cooperative does not, under any circumstances, require workers to surrender original personal documents or pay deposits. It does not use surveillance systems to monitor work performance, and it strictly opposes any types of contract that circumvent legal obligations or compromise workers' autonomy.

All personnel are hired voluntarily under second-level employment contracts, in accordance with the following national collective labour agreements (CCNLs):

- ✦ CCNL Agricultural Managers (23/02/2022)
- ✦ CCNL Agricultural and Nursery Workers (23/05/2022)
- ✦ CCNL Agricultural Managers and Clerks (18/06/2024)

The agreements applied by the company, as well as the second-level individual employment contracts used in accordance with these agreements, are available for consultation by all employees at the personnel office, along with the company's internal regulations.

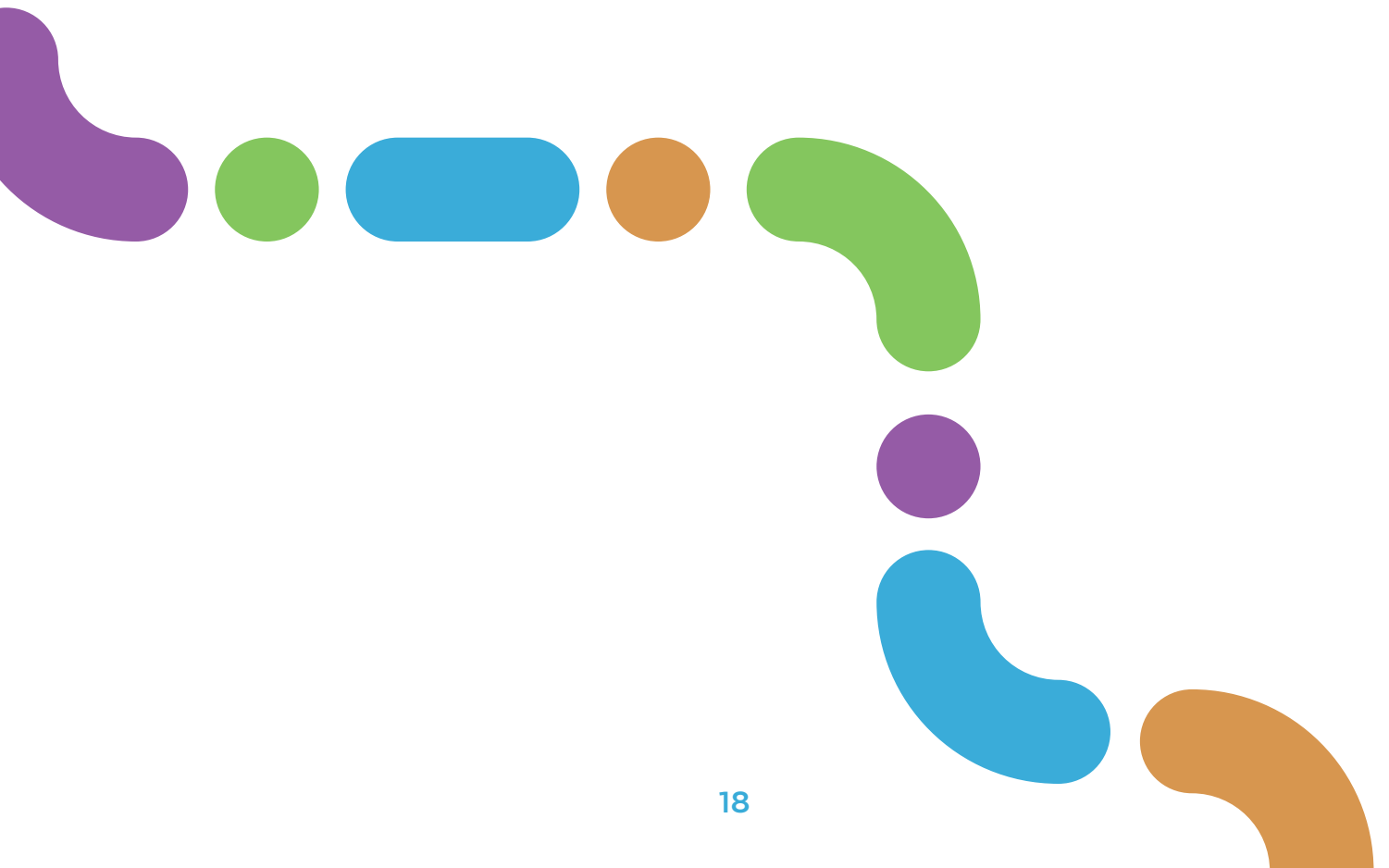
The cooperative prohibits the hiring of personnel under the age of 18 or who have not completed compulsory schooling. It has set up a special procedure for managing any cases of child labour in its social responsibility policy. During the period considered, the youngest worker was born on 20/08/2004 and hired on 04/10/2023 at the age of 19.

Case study: COVALPA - Italy

With respect to goal 8 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals concerning decent work and economic growth, the relationship between company and workers is also enshrined in dialogue with the trade unions from recruitment to the end of employment.

05

Challenges and opportunities



Case study: COVALPA – Italy

The **producer members** are, according to the cooperative, the **real protagonists of change**. For them, total quality, food safety, product certification, integrated pest management, environmental protection, food traceability, and the non-use of genetically modified organisms are not mere words but a constant reminder of the commitment they have made to consumer protection. For COVALPA, opportunities include enhancing cooperation, enhancing innovation and building strong community relations, while challenges include management complexity, competition with larger companies and the need to remain faithful to mutualist principles. The figure of the contributing member occupies a central role in the cooperative system, since it is through contributions that they realise their mutualistic purpose and ensure economic sustainability. The contribution represents not only the key element of the mutualistic relationship, but also the core of the internal regulation of cooperatives, which is based on a dynamic balance between rights and obligations.

In line with this approach, 2024 saw the continuation of strong business relationships and strategic collaborations with some of the largest operators in the Italian large-scale retail sector, including Selex, Eurospin, MD and Penny Market. These partnerships contributed to a sales volume exceeding 5,000 tons, further reinforcing the cooperative's role in delivering high-quality, sustainable products to a broad consumer base. This corroborates the fact that ethical and quality work done for the cooperative and its members leads to important promotional opportunities.

Agricultural cooperatives represent a peculiar company model, based on the principle of mutuality, which is at the core of both the legal framework and internal organisation. Unlike joint-stock companies, which are mainly profit-oriented, agricultural cooperatives pursue aim to satisfy the economic, social and professional needs of their members, through the collective management of production resources and the provision of goods and services at more favourable conditions than the market. Agricultural cooperation also allows the valorisation of local production and the promotion of a sustainable territorial development model. Its mutualistic character does not exclude the entrepreneurial dimension of the cooperative, which must operate according to criteria of economic efficiency to guarantee the sustainability of its organisational model.

Challenges

A clear priority challenge COVALPA faces is how the agricultural value chain struggles with **quality** against the now unstoppable import of agricultural products from **countries outside the EU**. Among the most serious **environmental threats** related to agricultural practices are soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, deterioration of water quality and water scarcity. In this perspective of resource preservation, the company is increasingly attentive to environmental and social issues.

More recently, the cooperative has been working actively to engage its workers more proactively, aligning this effort with its growing commitment to sustainability. This includes the adoption of social

reporting practices and the implementation of due diligence processes aimed at enhancing transparency, accountability and social impact across its operations. This approach also ensures that workers fully understand the value of their contribution and the importance of respecting internal work regulations, fostering a culture of responsibility and mutual respect within the cooperative.

Another important fact concerns the **relationship with suppliers**: COVALPA has a central national purchasing office that has been monitoring social and environmental impacts in the supply process for a long time: suppliers are actively involved, and it has already started to collect the necessary data for the calculation of Scope 3 and the ESG aspects required by CSRD.

Opportunities

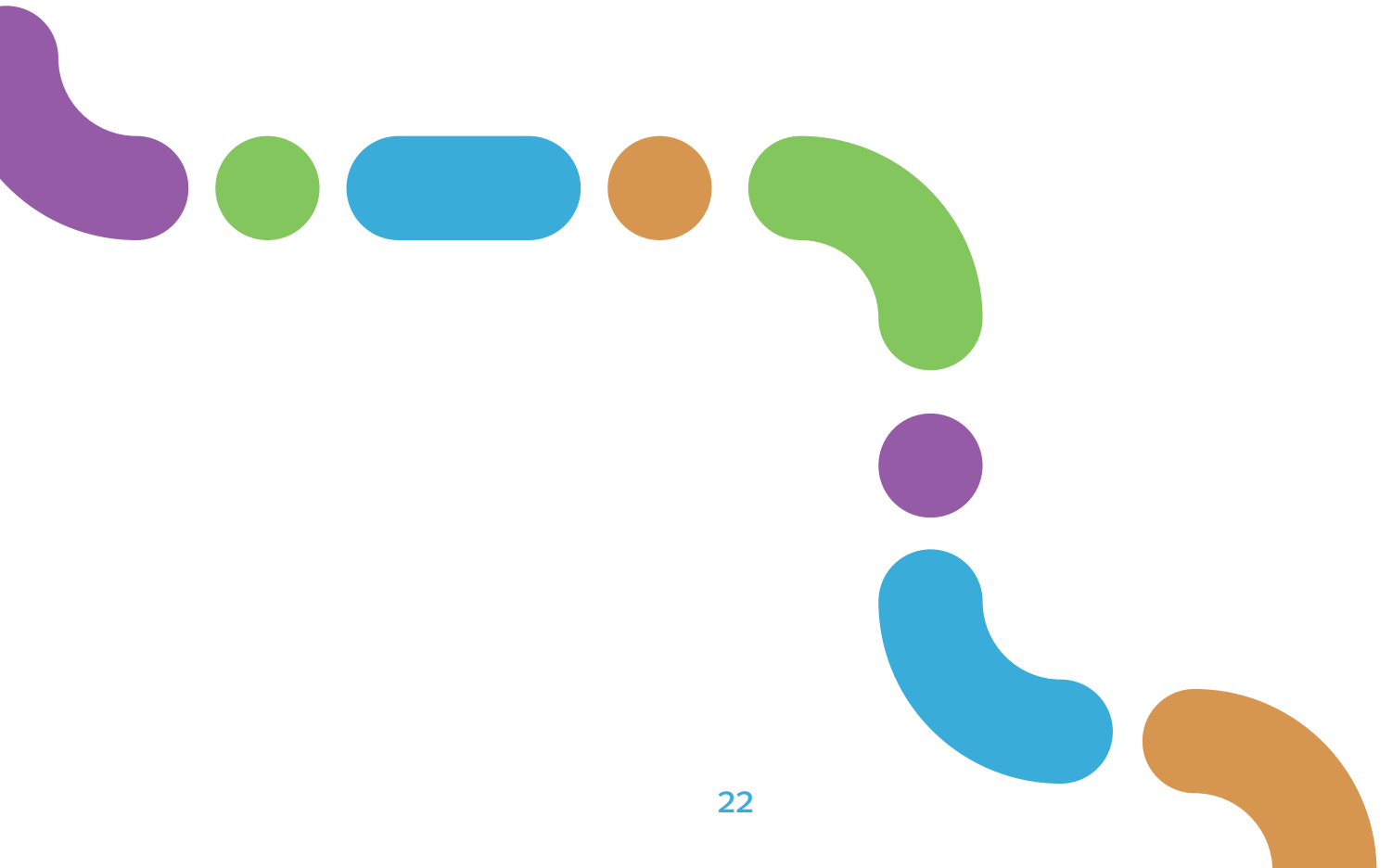
Digitalisation is a big opportunity that transforms the internal governance of the cooperative, making decision-making more efficient and inclusive. Tools such as digital platforms for managing assemblies, e-voting systems and information-sharing applications foster greater transparency and participation of members, while reducing administrative complexity.

One of the key benefits of digitalisation lies in the **improved management of assemblies and decision-making processes**, enabling greater participation, efficiency and transparency within the cooperative. Through the adoption of software for managing minutes and the integration of digital signature tools, bureaucratic procedures can be streamlined, while ensuring greater security and traceability in the decisions made. Often characterised by a large and territorially dispersed membership base, cooperatives can benefit from online meeting management platforms and electronic voting systems, which allow members to actively participate without the need for physical presence.



06

Strategies and actions



Case study: COVALPA – Italy

Environmental dimension

The term **sustainable agriculture** refers to agriculture that respects natural resources, the worker and the farmer. The relation between man and nature is a fragile and delicate one, and one that sustainable agriculture interprets in accordance with ethical, environmental and economic principles. COVALPA aims at an agriculture that continues to be productive, environmentally friendly and attentive to the needs of people and communities over time.

Agriculture is one of the most important activities for humans and it is also, not by chance, the sector that, more than any other, is subjected to the great challenge of our times: ensuring nutrition for an ever-growing population. According to COVALPA, all activities are carried out with the intention of reducing the impact on the environment. Crops are rotated in order to keep the soil fertile, protecting and nourishing them in accordance with real needs. Relationships with agronomists have helped to establish a strong and long-lasting relationship with farmer members, many of whom have been in the cooperative for more than 30 years.

Resource management is also important; in fact, innovative methods are used to always use the required amount of water. The drip and low-pressure irrigation method has been introduced for several crops, which optimises and significantly reduces water use.

Furthermore, great attention is paid to the quality of the **packaging**, which is 100% recyclable. The

cooperative achieves all this thanks to rigorous teamwork combined with a strict control protocol: the technicians, agronomists and producers involved work in harmony – from sowing to final processing of the products – to guarantee compliance with the highest quality standards, by continuously monitoring the chemical, nutritional and bacteriological characteristics of each product grown and processed. At the cultivation stage, each seed, before being planted, undergoes a control process to check its integrity and quality.

The soil to be sown is checked and stripped of any elements – such as insects and natural organic residues – that could adversely affect the actual quality of the planting. Irrigation is then carried out in an environmentally friendly and water-saving manner. The growth of the plants is also constantly monitored and protected with a natural and eco-sustainable procedure, without using products that could damage the environment and the product itself and alter its flavour. In fact, cooperative crops are protected through the controlled use of natural products that avoid contamination by external causes of the product itself.⁵

Governance dimension

As a cooperative, COVALPA adopts a governance model grounded in transparency, participation and accountability. The general assembly of member cooperatives exercises the highest authority, electing the board and approving strategic and financial plans.

⁵ Source: <https://www.covalpabruzzo.it/sostenibilita/> (retrieved 18.06.2025)

Board members include representatives of both producers and workers, ensuring alignment with cooperative values.

Sustainability is integrated into governance through dedicated internal policies – such as the Code of Ethics, the Sustainability Policy and the SA8000 Social Responsibility Policy – overseen by a coordination team responsible for continuous monitoring and improvement. The sustainability reporting process is guided by the CSRD framework and involves regular stakeholder consultations.

Internal control functions ensure compliance with legal and ESG standards, and oversight mechanisms include regular internal audits and third-party evaluations. This governance framework supports responsible decision-making, risk management and the long-term resilience of the cooperative.

Social dimension

COVALPA **promotes equal opportunities and combats discrimination of any kind**, avoiding differential treatment of people on account of their race, social class, national origin, caste, birth, religion, disability, gender, sexual orientation, family responsibilities, marital status, trade union membership, political opinions, age or any other condition that could lead to discrimination. The cooperative rejects trafficking in human beings in any way, and repudiates all forms of labour exploitation, including so called ‘caporalato’ (gangmasters).

This commitment, as indicated by the SA8000 standard⁶ is **also required of its stakeholders (including its suppliers)**, towards whom COVALPA reaffirms its desire and conviction to divulge the principles of social responsibility contained in the standard to the entire ‘chain’ of the service offered. In this, social dialogue manages to highlight both the difficulties and above all the opportunities in the development of employee contractualisation.

The cooperative’s principled stance made it a flagship of the *Di.Agr.A.M.M.I. Centro-Sud* project⁷ in the Abruzzo region. Its main actions were socio-labour integration interventions to prevent and combat labour exploitation and gangmaster (*caporalato*) practices. The project was based on a very diversified and widespread partnership covering institutions, enterprises and the third sector in eight regions in Southern Italy: Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Apulia, Sicily, Abruzzo, Molise and Sardinia. The project was supported by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies under Public Notice 1/2019, as part of the 2014-2020 national operational programme for inclusion.

In the cooperative, there are Italian employees and other foreigners who mostly come from Romania, Morocco and Albania. The foreign workforce in the province of L’Aquila is significant: 20% of foreign residents are of Moroccan origin and 7.6% are Albanian.

6 Source: <https://www.covalpabruzzo.it/new/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SA8000.pdf> (retrieved 18.06.2025)

7 Source: Di.Agr.A.M.M.I. Centro SUD: CRIS coordinates meeting in Celano in Abruzzo <https://www.consorziomeucciuruini.it/di-agr-a-m-m-i-centro%e2%80%90sud-cris-coordina-incontro-a-celano-in-abruzzo/> (retrieved 2 June 2025)

Case study: COVALPA – Italy

Although the total number of employees has been decreasing in recent years due to structural and economic factors, the project played a key role in promoting inclusive recruitment. It specifically targeted unemployed migrants, helping them enter or re-enter the labour market.

To better match labour supply and demand, the cooperative organised meetings with migrant job seekers to assess their skills, gather profiles, and define individual action plans. This approach reflects COVALPA's commitment to social inclusion and its cooperative mission, even in a context of overall contraction.

A key element of the initiative was **the close involvement of the trade union FLAI-CGIL**, which actively supported both the company and the migrant workers involved. Their integration into the workforce was further facilitated by the presence of interpreters, who ensured effective communication and mutual understanding. Training covered both basic and specialised skills, and was complemented by comprehensive information on logistics and transport systems.

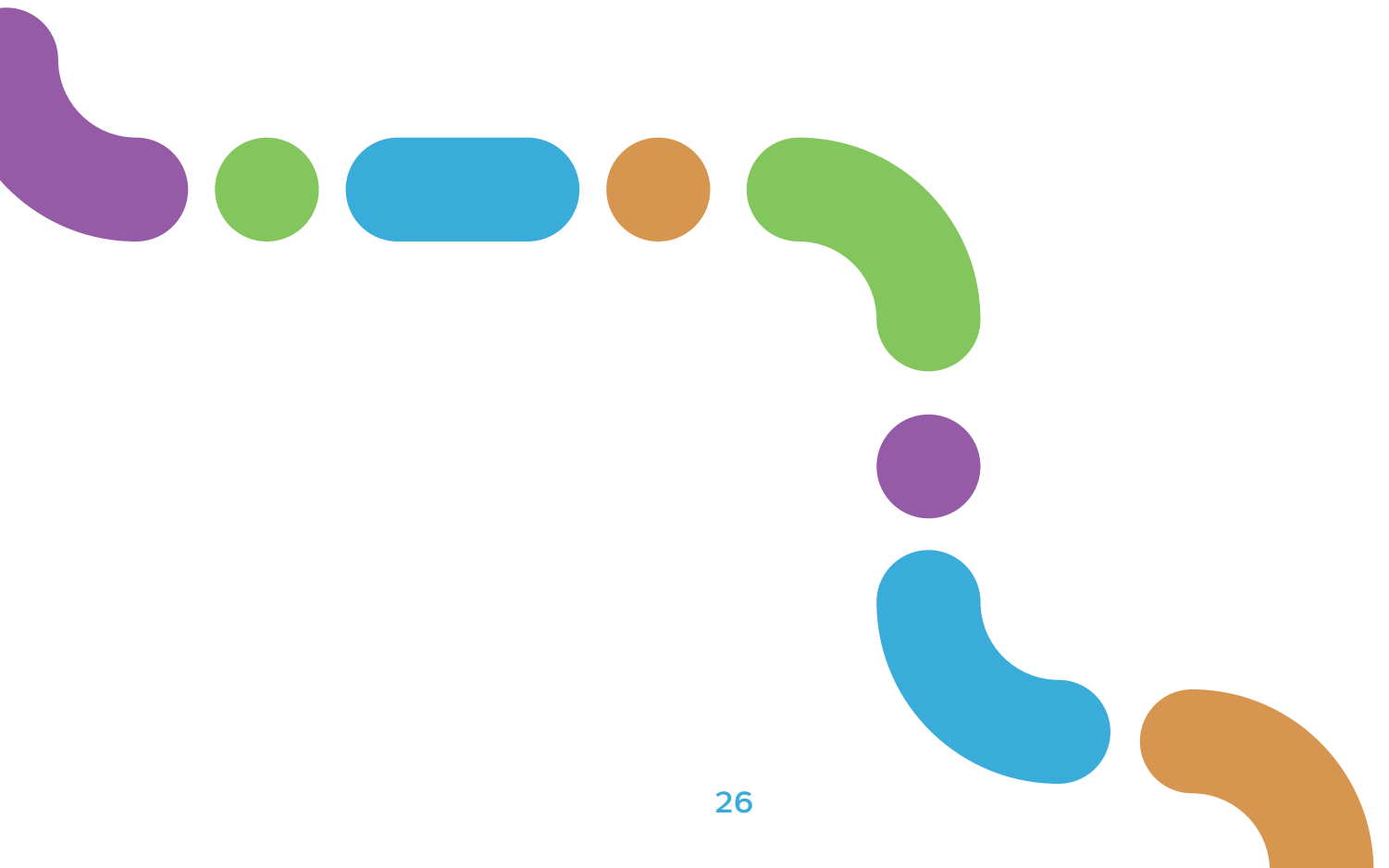
The support provided included Italian language courses certified by the University of Roma Tre, examination of migrants' labour rights, and the teaching of specialised skills that could be used in a variety of work situations.

An important lesson is that through synergy between actors of different types, a direct relationship was created between mayors and employers, which

putting into practice a virtuous insertion practice. Language difficulties slowed things down, but at the same time allowed all actors involved to acquire clear and shared objectives. Thus, in this case, the complexity of the different realities enriched and allowed for the improvement of internal and external policies.

07

Good practices and lessons learned



Case study: COVALPA – Italy

COVALPA has built a successful cooperative thanks to the commitment of its members and the strategic assessments of its management. COVALPA is part of a formal **business network contract** (*contratto di rete*) with DARTA, through which it shares knowledge, technological processes and access to international markets.

This collaboration reinforces COVALPA's ability to meet high quality standards and strengthens its position within European value chains.⁸

COVALPA will continue to work with commitment and determination to promote cooperation and sustainable development, always maintaining the high quality of its products and respect for the environment and the territory.

In alignment with ESG objectives, the cooperative's activities focus on a number of areas which are central for the cooperative:

- ✦ **Environment:** reduction of the carbon footprint throughout the food supply chain, efficient use of natural resources (water, soil), waste management, and reduction of pollution;
- ✦ **Governance:** transparency in the food supply chain, responsible management of resources, adoption of ethical and corporate governance practices that promote long-term sustainability.
- ✦ **Social:** guaranteeing food safety, promoting healthy and nutritious diets for all, social inclusion in food supply chains, respect for workers' rights in agri-food

companies, and welfare of farmed animals.

A key strength among the **good practices implemented by COVALPA** is its plan to enlarge its building, not only for economic reasons but in order to better meet its members' and workers' needs. COVALPA's enlarged factory represents an important step forward for the agri-food sector in the Abruzzo region and for the Fucino area, offering new job opportunities and contributing to economic growth.

⁸ Source: <https://www.darta.com/it> (retrieved 18.06.2025)

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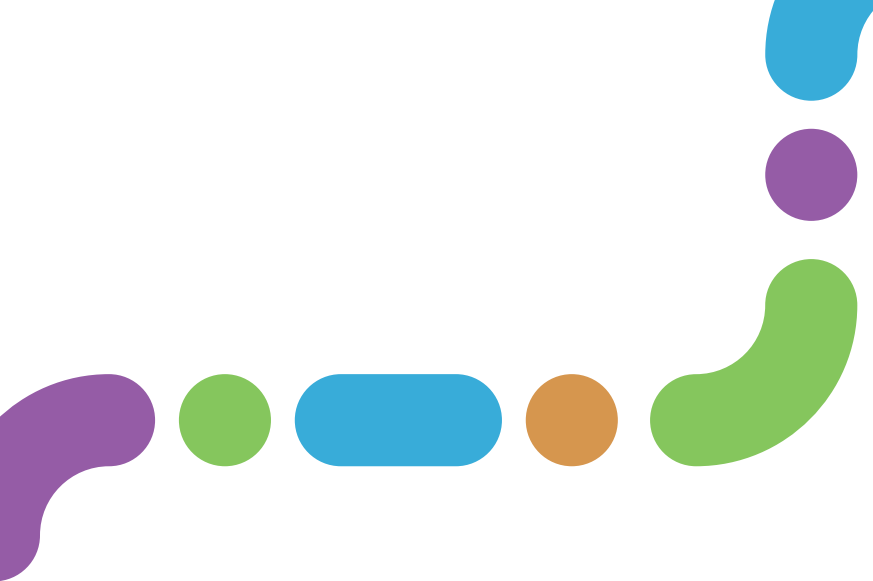
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