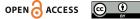
Lifelong Learning and New Competences: A Trans-Disciplinary Study on the Phenomenon of Inactivity in Adult Men

Lifelong learning e nuove competenze: Uno studio trans-disciplinare sul fenomeno dell'inattività degli uomini adulti

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ABSTRAC



DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

The phenomenon of inactivity in adult men, to which we usually refer only for a comparison with traditionally disadvantaged groups, is particularly important for bridging the knowledge gap that characterizes it and for its heuristic value in bringing out prospective indications for an integral human development. The essay confirms the hypothesis of the adult men inactivity, higher in Italy than in other European countries, as a possible condition that negatively affects not only income and family stability, but also the achievement of marketable skills and social awareness. The presentation of a trans-disciplinary study on inactivity in adult men analyses the relationship between object of investigation and the growing interest aroused by issues connected with education for ecological transition. It starts from the heuristic hypothesis according to which sustainability competences could constitute a significant pedagogical driver to respond to the working and social exclusion of the analysed target.

Il fenomeno dell'inattività dei maschi adulti, cui si è soliti riferirsi solo per esigenze di comparazione con i gruppi tradizionalmente svantaggiati, assume una peculiare rilevanza al fine di colmare il knowledge gap che lo caratterizza e per la sua valenza euristica nel fare emergere indicazioni prospettiche per uno sviluppo umano integrale. Il contributo accredita l'ipotesi dell'inattività maschile adulta, più elevata in Italia rispetto agli altri paesi europei, quale possibile condizione che incide negativamente non solo sul piano reddituale e della stabilità familiare, ma anche sul conseguimento di competenze spendibili e consapevolezza sociale. La presentazione di uno studio trans-disciplinare sul fenomeno dell'inattività degli uomini adulti pone a tema il rapporto tra l'oggetto d'indagine e il crescente interesse suscitato dalle questioni connesse con l'educazione alla transizione ecologica, a partire dall'ipotesi euristica secondo cui le sustainability competences potrebbero configurare un driver pedagogico significativo per rispondere all'esclusione lavorativa e sociale del target analizzato.

KEYWORDS

Adult education, Lifelong learning, Inactivity in adult men, Ecological transition, New competences Educazione degli adulti, Apprendimento permanente, Inattività maschile adulta, Transizione ecologica, Nuove competenze

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1. Introduction

The low activity rates that characterize Italy concern, albeit to different degrees, all social groups, men and women, young and mature people, citizens and foreign immigrants, and deserve special attention in a historical moment characterized by the transition towards more inclusive and sustainable productive and social processes (Zanfrini & Monaci, 2014). The proposed focus on inactivity that involves adult men constitutes a further matter that is worthy of exploration since it is a phenomenon traditionally ignored both by academic research and by policy interventions, as noted in the study released by Randstad in April 2022 which has the merit of having helped bring attention to the phenomenon. Among the not numerous international studies that deepen the inactivity in adult men, Eberstadt (2022) mentions Italy and the United States of America as the two countries most affected by the phenomenon of men without work, addressing the warning "The urgency of the moment is to bring this invisible crisis out of the shadows and into the public spotlight" (Eberstadt, p. 184). In Italy, in fact, there are growing trends in adult inactivity, with particular reference to the category of men; instead, it can be seen a slight decrease among women and people over fifty (ISTAT, 2024).

In this context, the essay critically interprets the *Not in labour force* (Nilf)¹ phenomenon as a condition that reduces the opportunities for inclusion in circuits of lifelong learning and social commitment (Eberstadt, 2018) and presents the multi-year research project (2023–2026) called (*Im*)perfect strangers. A trans-disciplinary study on the phenomenon of inactivity in adult men². In particular, the WP Reactivate for human development investigates the relationship that exists between adult men inactivity and the acquisition of sustainability competences, also through the mapping and in-depth analysis of some good practices present in the Lombardy area of education for ecological transition for adults in situations of fragility, inactivity, social marginality.

2. Forgotten Adults: Between educational poverty and occupational inactivity

Adult Education is part of the reflective flow spread under the name of LifeLong LifeWide Learning and/or Adult Learning, only in more recent years called Pedagogy of Work. Adult Education distinguishes the relevance for Pedagogy of dealing with both learning in adulthood and the educational processes that allow people to live together with courtesy (Boffo et al., 2022), provided they are equipped with a sense of responsibility universal to become workers and citizens,

- 1 The NILF (Not in labour force) phenomenon has been particularly investigated in the American context and refers to the adult inactivity of the male gender. See the contributions of N. Eberstadt for more information.
- 2 The research (Im)perfect strangers. A trans-disciplinary study on the phenomenon of inactivity among adult men is financed by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore through the University's Research Line of Interest (year 2022) and directed by Laura Zanfrini.

active protagonists of the future, for personal and collective benefit.

In this context, it is representative of the set of formal, non-formal and informal educational processes that affect adulthood (Federighi, 2018; Margiotta, 2015) and can be considered an important measurement tool of a socially oriented pedagogy (Gramigna, 2003). These aspects are now attributable to the history of Adult Education which, through the important contribution of some of its theorists (Dewey, 1916; Schwartz, 1972), traces in an education that lasts a lifetime, to be understood not exclusively in the sense of recurrent education, which remains primarily formal, the response to the needs of contemporary society. In this regard, adult education is compared today with the need to interpret the complex socio-economic transformations generated by the environmental crisis and the non-linearity of the socio-political cultural and technological scenarios which rapidly make learning contents obsolete, recalling the need to learn throughout life and in the multiplicity of places with which the person comes into contact throughout life. This means recognizing the educational value in adulthood, according to a lifelong-lifedeep-lifewide perspective (Bornatici, 2023).

Yet even today, the educational offer aimed at adults is often characterized by fragmentation, occasionality, territorial differences, and intrusiveness of other apparently priority needs, such as economic ones, aspects that hinder the taking into burden of needs that do not have the characteristics of immediacy or that do not express themselves spontaneously (Minello, 2022). Among other issues, we can think of the phenomenon of adult inactivity, often overshadowed by the problem of unemployment and completely neglected when it concerns the male population, traditionally considered the core segment of the labour market.

2.1 Adult Education in Europe and employability

The relevance of the topic is confirmed by the focus that the European Commission has placed on Adult Education to help improve social cohesion and active citizenship, as well as the competitiveness of European companies and economies.

The resolution adopted by the European Union Council on the 29th of November 2021 highlights the need to significantly increase the participation of adults in formal, non-formal, and informal education by 2030 (Council of the European Union, 2021), with specific attention to some priority areas:

- 1. Governance of Adult Education, strongly focused on the development of shared strategies.
- 2. Offering lifelong learning opportunities with sustainable funding.
- Quality, equity, inclusion and success of adult education, placing emphasis on the professional development of business operators, ensuring the quality of provision and active support for disadvantaged groups.
- Green and digital transitions and related competence needs.

In particular, the structural changes linked to the green and digital transitions represent a challenge for educational research which is urged to promote conditions that can favour the capacity for self-realization of the person who is concretely and historically anchored to their own life reality (Boffo et al., 2022).

The Eurydice Network report on the education and learning of adults in Europe (Eurydice, 2021), which examines the policies and measures implemented in the European countries to promote lifelong learning, highlights how the highest level of formal education achieved by the adult population constitutes an important indicator of the positive attitude towards education in general. From the perspective of lifelong learning this aspect is a confirmation of the need to invest in an initial learning system that is preparatory to the training process for all of life. The importance of participation in lifelong learning is confirmed by the fact that around 46% of the adult population requires retraining (Cedefop, 2020): this percentage includes both adults with low levels of education, and with medium-high levels of education but with poor possession of key competences or at risk of obsolescence of the skills acquired as they are similar to unqualified personnel. In addition to the level of education, other socio-economic characteristics have an impact on participation. An important factor is the age: young adults are more likely to participate in education and training than adults in older age groups. A key role is also played by the employment status. Working adults are on average more likely to participate in education and training than the unemployed or inactive people.

2.2 Italy's delays in lifelong learning

In Italy, the employment status greatly impact the participation in lifelong learning: the unemployed people (18 – 74 years old) have significantly less access to training activities (20.5%) compared to the employed people (44.1%), as do those employed in low-skilled professions compared to those who carry out more qualified professions (62.6% for managers, entrepreneurs and freelancers versus 24.6% for low-skilled workers) (ISTAT, 2022). Generally speaking, Italy sees a clear delay in lifelong learning compared to the main European Countries: a large number of individuals between 25 and 64 years olds do not study adequately and have no interest in doing so. The lack of a strong motivation to participate and the not always affordable costs are elements that we should take into due consideration (ISTAT, 2022). Precisely the categories that would most need to acquire, develop and update the skills necessary to keep up with the changes taking place, thus reducing the risk of leakage, are those who receive the least training.

In this context, the pedagogical reflection is stimulated to contribute to the promotion of organic and integrated forms of interventions to combat educational exclusion from adult education opportunities, also taking into account the needs that do not arise spontaneously, but which contribute to the perpetuation of forms of occupational and social marginalization.

2.3 Sustainability competences: A challenge for Adult Education

The rapid transition to a climate-neutral Europe and digital transformation are changing the way we work, learn, participate in society, and carry out our daily activities. Europe can take these opportunities only if citizens develop the right skills (European Commission, 2020).3 On the employment side, the acquisition of skills concerns both young people who enter the world of work, and professionals already employed for whom the upskilling process, i.e. the implementation of skills without changing their role, becomes relevant for maintaining high levels of competitiveness (Council of the European Union, 2016; European Commission, 2023). Faced with the changes that are taking place with unprecedented acceleration, we must also give value to the so-called reskilling, i.e. the retraining of staff to innovate work profiles that have become obsolete or acquire skills in new professional areas. In this regard, just consider that at least half of current workers will have to update their skills within the next five years, regardless of the sector they belong to (European Commission, 2020), and that this condition will represent a constant for all professionals. This process is already recognizable today in the field of digital and green skills, towards which the labour market is particularly oriented also as a consequence of the impacts that the ecological and digital transitions are generating on employment. In Italy, the demand for digital skills is affecting both new professions, such as data scientist, big data analyst, cloud computing expert, cyber security expert, business intelligence analyst and artificial intelligence system engineer, and more traditional jobs that will need digital skills to face the changing world of work (Unioncamere & Anpal, 2021). The effects of the transition towards sustainability are also proving to be particularly pervasive in terms of economic repercussions, with important transformations in the labour market. On the one hand, there will be new opportunities for emerging sectors that deal with the production of renewable technologies and sustainable products and services; on the other hand, the recognized transversality of the impacts of the green transition is generating a greening of multiple occupations. Green jobs concern therefore an ever-increasing number of professional sectors, just as sustainability, understood as a key skill for the future, must be applied to all spheres of life and at every age. Even the recent European GreenComp framework (Bianchi et al., 2022), closely related to prior studies on personal, social, and learning how to learn skills (Sala et al., 2020), identifies the promotion of sustainability competences as the basic prerequisite for education capable of putting the person in a position to manage transitions and uncertainty and to imagine and create more ecologically sustainable worlds (Gola & Morselli, 2023), members of a single living community (Birbes, 2016). Although GreenComp is not prescriptive, it offers a common framework of reference at European level that can be used by anyone involved in lifelong learning processes, with particular refe-

3 Rather than that of competence, the concept of skill is still dominant in these EU documents. rence to adult education. If the education for ecological transition therefore constitutes a strategic lever for updating professional profiles and acquiring the social self-awareness of belonging to a cohesive and interconnected community, implementing adequate educational opportunities for adults connected to the development of green skills that we have addressed so far, the involvement of even those who do not undergo training and have no interest in doing so could increase, due to the clear applicability of what has been learned in working life and the possibility of increasing opportunities for socializing and discussion with others.

In this regard, Torlone (2023) states that the learning exclusion is a product of a multiplicity of social factors. However, in terms of educational policies, we can highlight some factors that reduce the exclusion of adults from training courses:

- 1. The presence and compliance with quality standards of educational opportunities which are influenced by factors such as the existence of reliable and regular inspection and skills forecasting services and the quality of trainers (European Commission & ICF, 2015).
- Overcoming credentialism and attention to the real learning outcomes produced by education with consequent high use value of what has been learned in people's social and working lives.
- 3. The existence of learning infrastructures which do not refer exclusively to material resources, but also to information, counselling, orientation and career development services which affect the possibilities of bringing out the demand for education and the prospect of success of the interventions.
- The planning of more varied training courses than in the past, both in terms of content and traditional and non-traditional organizational and teaching methods, through which adult individuals would tend to be attracted (Costa, 2011; Spagnuolo, 2004).

In this framework of goals considered important to make adult education relevant and attractive, Marescotti (2020), in addressing the implications emerging from the encounter between sustainability education and adult education, which have only recently become explicitly interconnected, points out that we are witnessing a remarkable intensification of innovative educational pathways aimed at adulthood, no longer exclusively focused on literacy. It is then necessary to increase and connect the educational opportunities present on the territory, recomposing the multifaceted nature of the educational needs of the reference population, strengthening the role of trainers, ensuring constant monitoring on demand and the quality of supply.

3. (Im)perfect strangers: A trans-disciplinary study on the phenomenon of inactivity in adult men

In the contextual framework of all the above, we can find the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore-funded project, (Im)perfect strangers. A trans-disciplinary study on the phenomenon of inactivity in adult men,

which confirms the hypothesis on the *Not in labour force* (Nilf) phenomenon as a condition that fuels educational poverty in the adult population, reducing opportunities for inclusion in lifelong learning circuits and of social awareness. The project, through the involvement of several University Faculties (political and social sciences, educational sciences, medicine and surgery, literature and philosophy, law, economics, psychology, linguistic sciences and foreign literatures) aims to investigate a structural criticality of the Italian labour market that urgently needs to be brought to light in order to develop action strategies and paths of adult education useful to promote inclusive work and social welfare.

3.1 The project: rationale and aims

The lack of focus on a social segment that has always been considered advantaged and dominant could have caused invisible inequalities and poverty. The indepth examination of the phenomenon of adult men inactivity is therefore particularly interesting, both to bridge the knowledge gap that characterizes it, and for its heuristic value in bringing out characteristics, reasons, consequences and prospective indications in relation to its relationship with life careers, with individual and social well-being, with the system of inequalities, in the name of integral human development (Malavasi, 2020) and in line with a relational perspective (Zanfrini, 2021). Thanks to a distinctly trans-disciplinary approach and multiple qualitative and quantitative tools, the project, over the period 2023 – 2026, will aim to:

- 1. Reconstruct the scientific, cultural, and political debate on the measurement of the phenomenon of inactivity, its statistical construction, its thematization by the various disciplines, and the numerous actors involved with a focus also on the relationship between inactivity and inability to work and on the impact of the various income support measures that have emerged in the Italian and European legal landscape.
- 2. Describe the long-term trends of the phenomenon in Italy and identify the factors that determine the general trends and the differences between the territorial contexts.
- 3. Describe the recent trends of the phenomenon in the context of the international framework, any structural breaks linked to events such as the pandemic, its territorial characteristics, correlations with other variables (e.g. unemployment), flows into/out of the labour force.
- 4. Provide a picture of the composition of the phenomenon of male inactivity, with reference to variables such as age, educational and professional background, family status, attitudes towards work and job search/non-search, use of time, relationship life, social capital resources, and identify the main ideal-typical profiles of unemployed adult men.
- 5. *Identify* the links between inactivity and health conditions by examining the relationship with the risk of work-related stress.
- 6. Delve deeper into the motivations and meanings

connected to the condition of inactivity of adult men and explore its relationship with training and professional paths, the efforts/resources perceived in relation to the job market, the representation of the future.

- 7. Study the influence of the condition of inactivity (and its duration) on the relational experience and the processes of identity definition at a personal and social level, with particular attention to gender and role identities and beliefs about masculinity.
- 8. Explore the ways in which media representation translates male inactivity and orients it culturally and politically, as well as the underlying anthropological models, comparing them with the narrative and representational models of other cultural contexts.
- 9. Provide an estimate of the phenomenon of voluntary resignation and investigate how the transformations induced by the pandemic have translated into new meanings of work and changes in the psychological contract with work organizations, both from the point of view of (former) workers and that of companies.
- 10. Explore the opportunities for professional reactivation connected with education for ecological transition.

The trans-disciplinary study positions itself within this complex framework of goals considered essential for reconstructing the scientific, cultural, and political debate on the phenomenon of inactivity, particularly in Italy. The ultimate aim will be to provide useful indications to improve the inclusiveness of work organisations, the empowerment of vulnerable individuals and their media representation, according to the principles of social equity and sustainability.

3.2 Preliminary results and future prospects

The first year of research has defined, through an initial review of the not numerous studies that have examined the phenomenon of adult men inactivity, some ideal-typical profiles of inactive men in the age group between 30 and 54 years, on which we chose to primarily focus our attention. Generally speaking, it emerges that the universe of inactive people is quite heterogeneous and has porous boundaries that statistical sources do not always allow us to capture. In this regard, during the 1980s, the International Labour Office (ILO) undertook a harmonization of the definitions regarding the working conditions of the population to guarantee their comparability at an international level: ISTAT gradually adapted to these criteria, also following the coordination action carried out by Eurostat. According to these standardized definitions, individuals are classified as non-labour force if: they don't seek an employment in the last four weeks and they are not available to work within two weeks of the interview; despite not having looked for a job in the previous month, they declare themselves available to start a job within two weeks of the interview; they have been looking for a job in the last four weeks, but are not available to start a job within two weeks of the interview. Among those who declare that they are not looking for a job, there are those who would still be available to work and who are defined as discouraged, as the majority of them do not look for a job because they do not believe they can find it; vice versa, the unattached people do not show any interest in the job they are not looking for and for which they are not available (Viviano, 2003). These are criteria that only indicatively reflect the actual level of labour market attachment; in particular it is on the criterion of willingness to start a job that the greatest critical findings have been concentrated since it would lead, for some, to underestimating the real availability for work and for others to obscure the phenomenon of illegal employment among those who declare themselves unemployed. Furthermore, Viviano (2003) highlights a further area of weakness in reference to the definition of effort in job searching: the theory of job search suggests that the effort applied in the search action is an endogenous variable, not necessarily uniform between different economies or socio-demographic groups and can be influenced by institutional factors, technology and any possible element that determines a segmentation within the labour market.

Although the standardized definitions regarding the condition of those who are classified as non-labour force do not therefore allow us to fully grasp the heterogeneous composition of the inactive group, the limited studies that have explored the phenomenon of adult men inactivity tend to point out its non-voluntary nature, but rather due to long-standing unemployment, poor possession and updating of professional skills (Randstad Research, 2022), as well as health reasons, care responsibilities, early retirement suffered and failed reintegration attempts (Alcock et al., 2003). This condition is often accompanied by a sense of shame (Jiminez & Walkerdine 2010) and nostalgia for the condition of working-class men; in contrast, to the deliberate choice to be dependent on welfare for their own survival, despite social stigmatization (Nayak, 2006).

Other analyses highlight the risks faced by inactive men both in terms of income and health, family stability, social isolation, falling into deviant circuits or forms of dependence (Gallie et al., 2003) and, more generally, of psychological distress and mental illness (Buffel et al., 2015) which can even lead to the phenomenon of death of despair (Graham & Pinto, 2019). The main ideal-typical profiles of inactive adult males therefore highlight an involuntary deprivation, with important repercussions on physical and mental health, on the building of social bonds, on the possibility of acquiring capitalizable and expendable skills, on one's self-concept (Shamir, 1986). In a study involving some executives who lost their jobs (Finley and Lee, 1981), a clear dichotomy emerged between the ideal self and the self-image.

From a different point of view, disengagement from work can be connected to the recent phenomenon of *great resignation* which has been given particular impetus by the COVID-19 pandemic which, with its disruptive impact on the balance between professional and life time, has prompted us to focus on the *meaning of life* (Paterson-Young, 2021) and marked the peak of a trend that began years ago.

Due to the aforementioned relationship between employment status and participation in continuing education, the work initiated by the WP *Reactivate for* human development is particularly interesting. Led by the Faculty of Education,4 it assumes the heuristic hypothesis according to which sustainability competences could constitute a significant pedagogical driver for respond to the occupational and social exclusion of inactive adult men. In this regard, through exploratory research aimed at mapping some virtuous experiences of education in the ecological transition for adults in situations of difficulty, inactivity and marginalization in the Lombardy region, they investigated Training Centres, Employment Centres, Third Sectors, green-oriented enterprises through the use of documentary studies integrated with semi-structured interviews with representatives of public and private bodies (De Ketele & Roegiers, 1993). In this context, we would like to report the focus carried out on the experience of a type B social cooperative for the social and labour inclusion of disadvantaged people. Officina Casona, based in the province of Varese, through a the social laboratory titled Parallel: Products by Runaways [Parallelo: Prodotti da scappati di casa],⁵ promotes the inclusion and reactivation of people of all ages in conditions of fragility, inactivity, social marginality who are involved in training and coaching courses to learn how to create useful and sustainable products with recovered raw materials, intended for retail sale, as well as for supply to businesses, third sector organizations and public bodies. The Parallel Lab premises were opened in 2017 within a space seized from organized crime and have become a centre of social aggregation where there is no discrimination but, as stated by the founder during the interview "only the desire to learn a job sustainable, generate fruitful relationships and make everyone's talent flourish, in line with the challenges that the ecological transition poses to all of us, without exception". Through sustainability understood as key competence for the future, Parallel Lab believes in the opportunity to creatively recover fabrics, wood, leather and different types of objects, and also to rehabilitate young and not-so-young people, sedentary and travellers from every latitude and every parallel who can, together, improve their lives, becoming protagonists of change towards more inclusive and sustainable societies. Government and penal institutions, universities, museums, libraries, companies, cooperative societies, urban districts are the places where favourable educational actions to counteract adverse ones can be planned (Federighi, 2018); it is possible to promote a transformative learning, i.e. critical and creative, future-oriented (Mezirow, 1990); it is possible to overcome the learning exclusion equilibrium caused by educational poverty (Finegold & Soskice, 1988; Torlone, 2023). The critical examination of a virtuous experience of sustainability training for adults in fragile situations highlights the possibility of creating favourable conditions for acquiring the means to become active and responsible professionals and citizens. In this regard, in the national context, the number of projects that aim to deal with social, employment and

4 The research team for the WP *Reactivate for Human Development* (goal 10) consists of Ilaria Beretta, Cristina Birbes, Serena Mazzoli

5 Here, the concept of "runaways" is meant to good-heartedly denote people who are far away from their homes.

environmental needs in an integrated manner is growing (Matutini, 2023), an aspect that testifies to the presence, albeit still at an embryonic level, of forms of eco-social work (Gray et al., 2012; Närhi & Matthies, 2018). In the same manner, research aimed at the third sector is growing. These aim to understand the level of knowledge on the part of social workers of the ecological approach to social work, with particular attention to the ability to grasp the inseparability between the needs of the people who benefit from the services and the promotion of environmental well-being (Matutini, 2023). Furthermore, the analysis of some virtuous initiatives regarding the report under investigation, which is currently being explored6, might offer interesting reflective ideas regarding the contribution of training to sustainability competences in the fight against adult inactivity and lead to identification of further elements of replicability.

4. Conclusions

In Italy, a Country where men have been historically privileged in the job market compared to women, it is surprising to see how the percentage of inactive adult men is higher than the average of European countries. A recent study (Randstad Research, 2022) analysed on a national scale the phenomenon of adult men inactivity in the 30 – 69 age group, identifying some structural causes: long-term unemployment, extension of the Redundancy Fund, precarious work, early retirement, poor possession of key skills. This latter aspect occupies an important place at the time that robotization and AI are putting many jobs at risk and while new jobs require a high level of skills to support transitions—let alone the development of adequate competences. Employment status also generates a vicious circle, significantly influencing participation in lifelong learning: the unemployed and inactive people have decidedly less access to training activities than the employed ones, despite having an extreme need for them. When inactivity affects adult male population, social isolation, sense of shame and physical and mental problems also increase. In this complex mix of elements that predispose men to inactivity, it becomes important to promote adult education that cuts across all moments of life, which can promote reintegration into circuits of lifelong learning and social commitment, wherever it occurs.

Ecological transition pushes research, learning, professional practices to work together to bridge the knowledge gap related to the phenomenon of the inactivity among adult men, bringing out new cognitive evidence and useful indications for the formulation of educational strategies oriented according to the perspective of sustainability understood as virtuous synthesis among environmental protection, economic productivity and human well-being.

6 At the current state of research (WP Reactivate for human development) some significative experiences on the Lombardy territory are being explored. They focus on the relationship that exists between the object of investigation and the acquisition of sustainable competences (1 training centre; 3 social cooperatives that work with convicted people and former detainees; 1 B-Corp; 10 companies involved in social agriculture projects).

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