

Keeping a foot in two worlds can lead to success in both

It might seem foolhardy to take on organized crime, even more so while also treating patients with mental illness. But for an unusual social enterprise in rural Italy, this dual focus is a strength.

September 13, 2016

Campania, Italy is a stronghold of the Camorra, local organized crime. In this rural area, the Camorra operates in both legal and illegal markets, such as construction and drugs. It also extorts money from local businesses, corrupts politicians and public servants and siphons off public funds. It impoverishes the area both economically and socially.

In this setting, a dynamic social enterprise has been revolutionizing mental health care while also opposing the Camorra. The organization in question is the *Nuova Cucina Organizzata* (the New Organized Kitchen), which runs a restaurant on Camorra-confiscated property, employing mental health patients.

The Nuova Cucina Organizzata is successfully bringing about social change, using its position in two very different fields to its advantage. As such, it provides an illuminating case study of how "multiple embeddedness" — that is, operating in multiple fields at once — helps enterprises become more entrepreneurial and innovative.

In a paper recognized as one of the Academy of Management's Best Paper Proceedings for 2015, co-authors Valeria Cavotta, Tommaso Ramus and IESE's [Antonino Vaccaro](#) examine three essential strategies implemented by the Nuova Cucina Organizzata to achieve its impressive results.

The nuova cucina organizzata: reclaiming land and health

Since 2007, the Nuova Cucina Organizzata has operated its restaurant on property confiscated from the Camorra, which would normally be left unused for fear of reprisals. Boldly challenging the old subjugation to organized crime, the very presence of the Nuova Cucina Organizzata stands as a powerful symbol. It helps expose the Camorra as an economic system shamelessly dedicated to individual personal enrichment at the community's expense.

At the same time, the Nuova Cucina Organizzata is working to improve the treatment of mental health. It employs people with mental health problems in its restaurant, hosting them in home-like accommodations, and providing them with support networks and social rehabilitation within the community. In contrast, traditional treatment methods may isolate patients in clinics or hospitals for prolonged periods of time — and that isolation may then contribute to future relapses.

Via interviewing stakeholders and analyzing related materials, the co-authors identified the Nuova Cucina Organizzata's three main strategies in their ambitious work:

1. Common problems call for common solutions. First of all, the Nuova Cucina Organizzata identified a common social problem and proposed a common solution — a sort of social rehabilitation. Specifically, this social enterprise argued that "giving rights to the weakest members of the community [was] a way to nourish the wellbeing of the community." In contrast to the criminal model of enrichment at the expense of others, this business model promoted solidarity and fairness.

2. A badge of honor... or a mark of shame. Second, the organization had to counter considerable resistance, marshal recalcitrant community members and shift perceptions of its restaurant project. It did this through a process called "motivational framing," dividing the actors involved into categories. In this case, the categories were "the good," "the bad" and "the ugly."

"The bad" category fit the Camorra, which opposed the restaurant with threats and vandalism, angry at the use of "its" property. The category was also used to describe the mental health establishment, which actively pushed back against the new model of treating patients outside of traditional protective structures.

Countering "the bad," the organization positioned itself, its allies and the mental patients working for them as "the good." Calling people with mental disorders "good" helped shift perceptions from their traditional label of "socially dangerous people." This framing contrasted their productive and pro-social work with the moral and community breakdown brought about by organized crime.

The organization also created a third category: "the ugly." Since the weakness of the state enabled organized crime to flourish in the region, the Nuova Cucina Organizzata used this third category to shame those who simply refused to offer support. Most notably, the regional president was included in this category in an attempt to nudge him into action.

3. Unite allies to the cause. Thanks in part to this framing technique, the Nuova Cucina Organizzata mobilized more allies than enemies. In fact, it recruited a wide variety of anti-Camorra actors — associations, magistrates, politicians — to collaborate with their health care initiative. Similarly, health care actors — ranging from social enterprises to public health administrators — have taken on the Camorra-free, social business model.

A model for change

The Nuova Cucina Organizzata illustrates the power of multiple embeddedness to help implement institutional change. It allows entrepreneurs to question practices that may be taken for granted by others. In doing so, it helps open people's minds to new possibilities — possibilities it can thus make reality.

The organization also sheds light on how entrepreneurs can motivate others. By successfully countering opponents and bringing together many allies, innovators embedded in more than one field can bring about more profound change. In other words, it seems that sometimes having a foot in both camps is the best way to move forward.

www.iese.edu/insight