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Exploring Neighbourhood Integration Dynamics of Sri Lankan Entrepreneurs in Rione Sanità, Naples

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Abstract: Integration is always at the core of migration studies and is examined from various theoretical perspectives. While integration models are valuable for understanding how national political systems influence the integration of foreigners into society, the real challenge of integration manifests at the local level. From a neighbourhood-based approach, this article addresses the integration trajectories of Sri Lankan entrepreneurs in Rione Sanità, Naples, which is a socio-economically deprived neighbourhood hosting a substantial segment of foreign populations and has been the target of significant urban regeneration initiatives over the past decade. Sri Lankans established travel agencies, fiscal assistance centres, restaurants, takeaways, and retailers in a transformative context. This article highlights how entrepreneurial initiatives are shaped by the mutual connection linking immigrants with the place where they found economic and relational opportunities. The results serve as a crucial starting point for better understanding the long-term outcomes of the socio-economic integration at the neighbourhood level.

Keywords: neighbourhood integration; Sri Lankan entrepreneurs; social capital; social network analysis



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1. Introduction

Immigrant integration is a challenge from both political and scientific sides. In the European scenario, while the governance of states aims to regulate migration flows through entry control mechanisms, it also formulates policies that influence the effective integration of immigrants. Integration policies that include legal status, family reunification, access to health services, education, the housing system, and the labour market suffer from fragmentation at the level of individual Member States due to the gradual decentralisation of responsibilities to other subnational institutions (Passalacqua and Grossio 2023; Huddleston and Scholten 2022; Xhardez 2020). On the scientific side, integration has been examined from different fields, seeking to shed light on how it manifests itself in host societies (Huddleston and Scholten 2022; Ahmed et al. 2021; Villa 2018; Joppke 2014), its conceptual dimensions, and how it can be measured (Goñda et al. 2021; Coşciug 2018; Harder et al. 2018; Caselli 2015).

While national regulations have influenced ethnic integration outcomes, shaping policies ranging from mere tolerance to the valorisation of cultural diversity, interest in observing immigrant integration at the local level have grown over time. In particular, the local level shift in immigrant integration occurred in the past two decades due to the increased responsibility attributed to municipal governments in the implementation of migration policies besides the top institutional level, as well as the prominent role of the social third sector and other non-public actors in addressing the needs of immigrants in the host society (Caponio and Borkert 2010; Campomori and Caponio 2017; Scholten et al. 2017).

Also, the OECD emphasised the importance of integration policies by considering various characteristics of immigrants, including age, gender, and educational level, as well as considering factors related to the host city, such as housing availability and employment

rates (OECD 2018). Hence, immigrant integration should be conceived as an urban phenomenon. As a result, integration trajectories emerge from a two-way process involving both immigrants and the local context, encompassing inhabitants, institutions, cultures, and relationships.

The present study employed a neighbourhood-based approach to examine the integration trajectories of the Sri Lankan community in Naples within the context of Mediterranean Europe. Specifically, it delved into the socioeconomic dimension of integration, focusing on recent entrepreneurial initiatives in Rione Sanità, which is a neighbourhood characterised by a higher concentration of Sri Lankan residents.

It is worth clarifying that immigrant entrepreneurship presents ambivalent aspects regarding integration outcomes. There is a broad consensus that inclusion in the local labour market, including forms of self-employment, is a fundamental aspect of the integration process, as it can make immigrants independent from national welfare systems (Joppke 2007; Huddleston 2020; De Coninck and Solano 2023). Furthermore, employment can impact income; consumption; access to better housing standards; and, generally, enhance the overall quality of life. However, transitioning to self-employment should be approached with prudence as an indicator of social and economic integration because it might represent more of a sign of apparent integration (Ambrosini 2013; Bellesi 2016; Solano et al. 2022). In such cases, immigrants might resort to self-employment due to challenges accessing salaried employment markets or overcoming unemployment (Cruickshank and Dupuis 2015; Brzozowski and Lasek 2019).

The main assumption of this study was that entrepreneurial initiatives are shaped by the mutual connection linking immigrants with the place where they found economic and relational opportunities. The latter are considered closely linked with the family, relations with the ethnic group and the neighbourhood, and relations with local institutions and stakeholders.

This study addressed the following research question: what role do locally nurtured personal networks play in shaping entrepreneurial initiatives?

The results reveal how the entrepreneurial paths of Sri Lankans developed within an ambivalent *opportunity structure* (Kloosterman and Rath 2006). Although favourable conditions for starting trades and services arose in Rione Sanità, these face several vulnerabilities.

Such vulnerabilities refer to both the business profile and the agencies or institutions of the metropolitan area, which are inadequate to support and enhance economic initiatives with specialised services. Overall, the results highlight evolving integration paths in an urban context, such as Naples, where immigration is stabilising in the territory. Focusing on these processes is fundamental to contributing to a relatively unexplored field within the specific territory under examination and directing urban integration policies.

This article is structured into five sections. Section 2 frames the study within the framework of neighbourhood integration. Section 3 provides a brief overview of Sri Lankan migration to Naples. Section 4 introduces the research method, focusing on the ego-network approach. Sections 5 and 6 discuss the results, contextualising the neighbourhood settlement patterns and business opportunities, as well as the reliance on social networks as a potential resource for enterprises. Section 7 concludes the article.

2. The Neighbourhood Integration Framework

Immigrant integration must be analysed by considering the mutual interactions between individuals and social groups and the specific features of the urban territories.

Space plays a dual explanatory function: it influences social integration processes and acts simultaneously as a container for relationships of social proximity or distance between different groups. It is argued that the integration question coincides with the problem of the socio-physical location of the foreigner. As Simmel writes in *Sociology* (1908), the foreigner is the *person who comes today and stays tomorrow*, settling in a physical and relational context to which, however, they do not belong basically from the beginning. This

position makes them both close to and distant from the members of the social body as the holder of different values and cultural elements. The generated tension between inclusion and exclusion makes the foreigner the boundary of the community, forcing society into a continuous process of redefinition (Simmel [1908] 1998). Though avoiding explanations based on all spatial determinism, this perspective recognises the importance of territorial specificities and their influences on social phenomena (Ciaffi et al. 2020), including the integration processes of immigrants. Indeed, the weight of “alterity” is most evident in cities, and urban spaces function as devices to include or exclude minorities (Sennett 2018).

Consequently, the volume of foreign presence in the territories—differentiated by arrival times, reasons for migration, origin, cultures, identities, and expressions of faith—indicates the need for diversified readings of integration pathways. Cities play a pivotal role in the governance of migration since it is within these borders that the “problem” of daily coexistence between old and new inhabitants is measured. Building on the contributions of the Chicago School (Park and Burgess 1921), a rich corpus of studies focused on analysing the close connection between migration and place on various territorial scales (Barberis and Pavolini 2015; Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2015). This study aligned with the neighbourhood integration framework, identifying the neighbourhood as a strategic place to observe how immigrant communities organise their settlement patterns, stabilise socioeconomic positions, and foster relationships both within and outside the ethnic group (Phillips and Robinson 2015; Hanhörster and Wessendorf 2020; Miranda 2020; Lin et al. 2020, 2023; Liu 2023). Consequently, urban forms and the built environment determine the settlement character of immigrants, affecting various aspects of integration, such as health, individual well-being, access to services, and a range of life opportunities (Chetty et al. 2016; Galster 2019; Miranda 2020). Two main strands of study stand out in this framework. The first focuses on the role played by ethnic enclaves in host cities as the immigrants’ preferred initial settlement. Following the approach of several classic studies, the choice to settle in an enclave does not inhibit pathways of ascending social mobility, which, however, occur over time with a gradual dispersion into less ethnically defined neighbourhoods (Portes 1987; Logan et al. 2002). As observed in some communities, the enclave represents an advantage in socio-economic affirmation, with many immigrants setting up thriving businesses in enclave economies and even creating self-sufficient communities (Dikici 2021). The second strand of studies focuses on the role of mixed neighbourhoods and the controversial outcomes of integration pathways (Zapatka and Tran 2023; Galster and Sharkey 2017; Bolt and van Kempen 2013). On the one hand, physical proximity in contexts mixed by origin and class background fosters the creation of transversal relationships between different social groups, accelerating the social inclusion processes (Joseph et al. 2007; Echenique and Fryer 2007; Reardon et al. 2009).

On the other hand, living in mixed and more deprived neighbourhoods leads to “contextual effects”, resulting in a lack of social cohesion; limited access to services; a weak sense of place attachment; and, more generally, significant repercussions on ascending social mobility (Bailey et al. 2012; van Ham and Manley 2012; Hanhörster and Wessendorf 2020; Méreiné-Berki et al. 2021).

However, contemporary integration processes may not develop along a linear, ascending trajectory due to the considerable discretion generated by place-specific circumstances. For example, immigrants, despite having achieved a decent economic situation, may choose to stay in neighbourhoods to preserve social relations, easily acquire housing, benefit from proximity to workplaces, take advantage of opportunities to start a business, or simply because they do not perceive those neighbourhoods as disadvantaged (Hanhörster and Wessendorf 2020). In other cases, the immigrants’ willingness to embark on socio-spatial mobility may be impeded by broader urban transformation processes, such as urban policies, commercial gentrification, over-tourism impact, and real estate market dynamics that make other urban areas unaffordable.

Against this background, the neighbourhood-based approach proves valuable not only to closely examine migrant integration trajectories but also to identify the peculiarities and dynamics that uniquely characterise each locality.

3. Brief Overview of Sri Lankan Migrations to Naples

The reasons for Sri Lankan migration stem from the long history of conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, which started in 1983 and lasted about three decades (Chattoraj 2017, 2022). The escalation of the war with severe forms of poverty caused large numbers of displaced persons, both in the internal areas and in Western countries (ibid.).

The arrivals from Sri Lanka to Naples occurred around the 1980s through various migratory strategies: religious channels, work permits, and family reunifications (Fraudatario 2021). Initially, this phenomenon displayed the temporary nature of their stay and combined with emigration from southern regions to other regions in northern Italy that offered better job opportunities. This dynamic, defined as *migrations within immigration* (Calvanese and Pugliese 1991), reflects how the specificities of Italian regions structured opportunities for immigrants and natives alike. Immigration from Sri Lanka took place gradually. Initially, men mainly came and found employment in the domestic care and catering sectors. Later, other family members joined them. These factors highlight the long period spent before the ethnic group assumed its current configuration. However, this process is not yet over. Many broken families are pursuing reunification nowadays, while others have formed households within the host city. Children have been born in these unions, which will pose a challenge for second-generation integration in the near future.

As mentioned above, most Sri Lankans have integrated into the domestic care sector, working as housekeepers and caregivers for Neapolitan families. Several advantages resulted from this. For example, the opportunity to easily engage with the local population, learn Italian, secure employment guarantees, supplement income by providing services to the employers' friends (word-of-mouth), initiate procedures for family reunifications, and live in the houses where they work (Bitonti et al. 2023; Benassi et al. 2022; Mazza et al. 2018). However, job placement has also influenced the choice of where to live, such that there were 14,627 Sri Lankan residents in Naples in 2023.¹

As observed in a recent study on the residential segregation of the Sri Lankan community in Italy, in Naples, as in other southern realities, the Sri Lankan community concentrates in many central neighbourhoods, unlike in northern cities, where the community is more scattered throughout the urban areas (Bitonti et al. 2023). Consistent with these findings, 82.6%² of Sri Lankans reside in the I, II, and III districts of Naples, particularly in the neighbourhoods of Stella (26.6%), Avvocata (18.9%), Montecalvario (9.7%), and San Carlo all'Arena (9%). Meanwhile, the presence of Sri Lankans in wealthy neighbourhoods, such as Chiaia (6.5%), San Ferdinando (3.6%), and Posillipo (5.6%), are strictly related to their employment in the domestic care sector, where the place of residence coincides with the workplace.

The city's infrastructural conditions may also explain the residential patterns in the central neighbourhoods. The housing stock, often old and poorly preserved, has attracted greater demand from immigrants with different backgrounds. In addition, these neighbourhoods are strategic for travel by foot or local public transportation to easily reach workplaces and meeting places during leisure time.

4. Research Methods

This article discusses the main findings of research conducted between 2019 and 2020,³ addressing the following research question: what role do locally nurtured personal networks play in shaping entrepreneurial initiatives?

The assumption of this study was that entrepreneurial initiatives were shaped by the mutual connection linking immigrants with the neighbourhood that as a place of proximity, fostered social interactions, encouraged economic practices, and facilitated the mixing of

different social groups. The research adopted a qualitative methodology grounded in the urban context of Rione Sanità. The first approach to the fieldwork was through urban exploration and conversations. In this way, it was possible to obtain the characteristics of the neighbourhood, the prevailing settlement pattern for Sri Lankans, the social gathering places, and the economic fabric of the area. The direct approach to the neighbourhood was instrumental in involving Sri Lankans who own shops and service activities in Rione Sanità; convenience sampling resulted in a total of 18 interview participants (comprising 15 men and 3 women).

The interview guide was structured into two sections. The first section explored the motivations behind starting a business, personal resources, initial and acquired professional skills, former work experiences, leisure time, relationships with the neighbourhood, and whether the neighbourhood they launched their business in coincided with their residence. These aspects were fundamental to understanding the entrepreneurial dynamics and considering the contextual and transformational factors that have affected Rione Sanità over the past decade. The findings are presented and discussed in the following section.

A form for ego-network (or personal network) was structured to analyse which actors and resources were indispensable in the foundation of the business for the second section.

The perspective adopted was multilevel ego-networks. This is a research method specific to social network analysis. The ego-network approach enables taking the viewpoint of a focal individual to investigate the relationships (ties) and exchange content within its social environment (Campbell and Lee 1991; Crossley et al. 2015). Multilevel analysis is a variant of this research that considers networks as nested hierarchical structures, as social systems are inherently multilevel (Lazega et al. 2008; Snijders 2016; Lomi et al. 2016; Vacca et al. 2022). Assuming that multilevel networks are types of nodes operating at distinct levels, such as groups and individuals, with possible connections between all nodes, both within each level and across them (Lomi et al. 2016), the aim was to grasp the social support in the business creation process.

Hence, the entrepreneurs indicated the individuals or groups they had interacted with, the types of existing relationships, and the content conveyed during the setting-up phase. The ego-network levels were (a) family, friends, and acquaintances; (b) local institutions, offices, associations, and trade unions; and (c) other businesses. For each subject (individuals or groups), the interviewees explained why they were involved and how these individuals or groups provided practical support for the enterprise venture.

5. The Neighbourhood Integration of Sri Lankan

Rione Sanità, which is close to downtown Naples, assumed a popular vocation from its origins based on a simple economic fabric related to retail trade and handicrafts engaged in leather processing (tailors, tanneries, dressmakers, and shoemakers). Since the 1980s, Rione Sanità has been an area of settlement of different ethnic groups, among which the consistency of the Sri Lankan group stands out today. The old and low-standard housing has offered the opportunity for immediate residential settlement for immigrants arriving in the city. As emerged in this research, and in line with previous studies, immigrants found initial accommodation in street-level rooms arranged in a few square meters (Pugliese and Sabatino 2006; Fraudatario 2018). The segregation of ethnic groups is moderate, as the neighbourhoods remain inhabited by natives, as in the rest of the city.

During various urban explorations in Rione Sanità, it was observed that families of different social backgrounds coexisted within the same building. Other apartments were converted into rental accommodations for off-site students or B&Bs for tourists. Sri Lankans, other migrant groups, and Neapolitan families belonging to the underclass usually occupied the ground-floor premises. Vertical segregation represents an ancient *modus habitandi*, according to which each building floor matches families of different social classes, and still characterises the modern city of Naples (Barbagli and Pisati 2012). The proximity helped to bridge the social distance and created a dense network of relationships and mutual support. Today, some of these relational constructs continue to shape spontaneous

strategies of social mixing that facilitate multi-ethnic coexistence. As evidence of this residential settlement, several interviewees reported that once they achieved economic stability and their school-aged children's needs required a larger dwelling, they either rented or purchased apartments on the upper floors of the buildings where they already lived. This phenomenon indicates that residential mobility has mainly followed a vertical trajectory, rather than a horizontal one, towards other neighbourhoods in the city. Various territorial practices are a sign of the presence of the Sri Lankan community within the neighbourhood and the pattern of their settlement within it. For example, some churches have repurposed liturgical celebrations being held every Sunday in their language, along with catechesis activities and mutual aid. Other practices refer to the economic activities prompted by Sri Lankans. The signs of grocery shops, takeaways, restaurants, barbershops, travel agencies, tax assistance centres, consultancy offices, telecommunication services, and money transfers are evident while walking through Rione Sanità. At times, multilingualism serves as a commercial strategy for Neapolitan businesses targeting the most consistent ethnic group of the neighbourhood (an example being the translation of food offers or services, such as gold exchange, in Sinhala). Despite the immigrant entrepreneurship often passing quietly, it is undeniable that their enterprises are continuously growing. Rione Sanità is an emblematic case, recalling what [Park and Burgess \(1921\)](#) defined as *ecological integration*, which is a way of living and moving in the neighbourhood without affecting one's lifestyle or that of locals.

5.1. The Entrepreneurial Vocation

Several substantial changes that have taken place over the past decade emerged during fieldwork in Rione Sanità. The regenerative push promoted by local associations, citizens, and businesses culminated in the recovery and reopening of archaeological sites, the organisation of cultural events, and a diverse range of facilities and opportunities for expanding tourism, thereby creating profits for the entire commercial industry in the district.

The Sri Lankan enterprises integrate into this fabric, although their businesses only partially target mixed customers. Apart from grocery shops and fast food, most activities aim to meet the needs of the ethnic group. These include businesses such as tax assistance centres, money transfer services, and travel agencies. The motivations in starting up seem to overlook this change, despite the Rione Sanità revival being advantageous for some Sri Lankan businesses. Interviews reveal that starting a business is more of a response to employment issues, low-medium education qualifications that limit employability, and dissatisfaction with caregiving work within families.

This aligns perfectly with the general Italian context, which highlights, on the one hand, the sectoral concentration of Sri Lankans in public, social, and personal services (57%) and, on the other hand, modest growth in self-employment (+6% in the period 2020–2021) ([Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2022](#)).

The motivation behind the decision to start a business followed two trends: the first concerned early pioneers, while the second involved the younger generations. The pioneers, usually the first Sri Lankan immigrants in Naples, invested in trade, import/export, and services to gain tangible economic benefits and enjoy a certain social reliability within the community:

The problem with work practices, tax declaration, family reunifications [...] the community needed someone from within to solve these issues.

On the other hand, among the newcomer younger generations, there was a trend to seek out untapped market niches to fill in with more exclusive products compared with those already widespread in the ethnic market:

When I occasionally talked to my husband, I said that here, our fellow countrymen only open grocery stores and travel agencies ... there are many new Sri Lankan shops, but no one has opened a stationery store. I thought that could be something different to sell not

only school supplies, stationery, phone recharges, and transport tickets that can also be suitable for Italians, but also books in the Sinhalese language for both adults and children.

This framework underlines how the decision to start a business depends on various factors attributable to the opportunities and limitations encountered in urban contexts and individual skills, such as past professional experiences, aspirations, soundness of business projects, and functional relationships.

5.2. Demography of Sri Lankan Businesses

This section presents descriptive data that outline the demographics of businesses (Table 1). Most activities belonged to two categories: (1) consultancy and services agencies and (2) retail. The former aimed to offer solutions that meet the needs of Sri Lankans, while the latter attracted a mix of customers. The first category included travel agencies, import and export businesses, money transfer services, tax assistance centres, and personal services (hairdressers and barbers). The second involved groceries, electronic devices, and other items. Only one business was a supplier of food products for ethnic shops and restaurants, which also catered to other groups. Considering other variables, such as the number of locations and employees, the emerging enterprises seemed less structured in the neighbourhood. Apart from suppliers, all of them operated from a single location. Concerning the number of employees, except for the restaurant and service sectors, which required more staff, all other activities had a self-employment profile. However, from the interviews, it was evident that even in cases where more employees were registered, they were usually recruited from within the family or from a circle of trusted friends.

Table 1. Business profile.

Investment Sector	N. Enterprises	Branches (Average)	Employees (Average)	Customers
Services and consultancy agencies	8	1	3	Ethnic
Retail	6	1	0.8	Mix
Restaurant and fast food	3	1	4.3	Mix
Supplier	1	2	4	Co-ethnic

As anticipated earlier in this article, the phenomenon of Sri Lankan entrepreneurship is of recent establishment in Rione Sanità. Therefore, time is also a variable that has impacted the current configuration of the business. In this regard, it is interesting to observe the temporal evolution of enterprises by year of foundation (Figure 1).

The observed trend highlights an incremental growth in openings, with a peak between 2006 and 2013, suggesting two reflections. First, it is significant to consider the settlement process of this group in the area. Considering that the first arrivals from Sri Lanka occurred approximately 40 years ago, it took some time for Sri Lankans to overcome the initial challenges of inclusion in the local job market. However, as the community stabilised within the host society, their entrepreneurial presence became more structured, mainly for providing typical ethnic services and products. A second observation explicitly concerned the neighbourhood. In fact, between 2010 and 2012, Rione Sanità began a social upgrading path by exploring workable alternatives to unemployment, urban decay, and organised crime that previously affected its social fabric. These regenerative drives had a beneficial influence in creating a more welcoming and secure environment to run businesses. Among the interviewees, some argued that the transformation within the neighbourhood served as an additional impetus towards initiating entrepreneurial endeavours and mitigating *the apprehension of encountering adverse retaliation*.

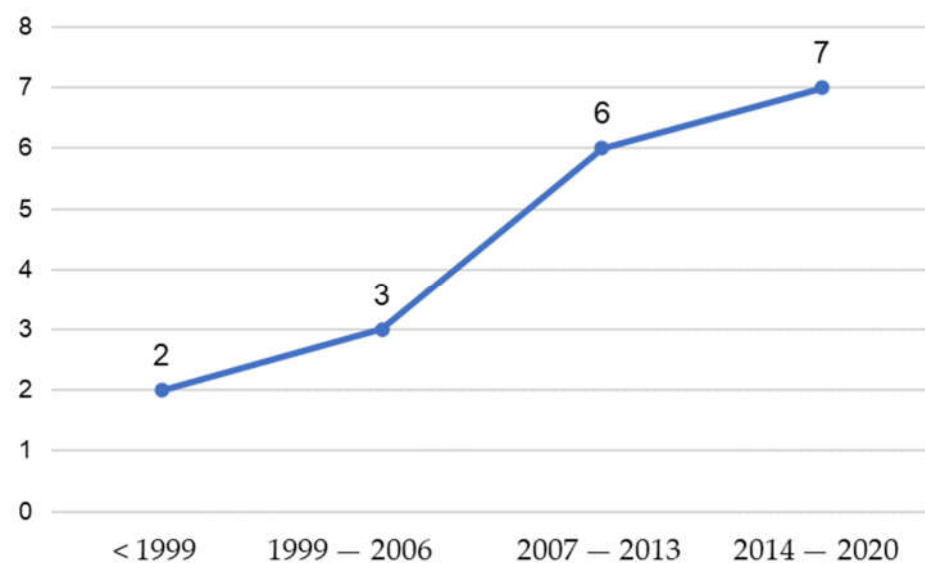


Figure 1. Foundation year.

6. Narrative Ego-Networks

This section provides an answer to the research question that focused on the functioning of ego networks and whether and how locally cultivated relationships supported the creation of the enterprise. As anticipated in the Research Methods section, the data collected yielded multi-level ego networks, where each level referred to a specific social environment: the family and friendship domain, the territorial context, and the commercial sphere.

This section discusses the ego-network configurations of two emblematic entrepreneurial strategies in which family support and the benefits of belonging to multiple social groups and contexts prevailed.

6.1. Family Support

The family institution plays a crucial role in immigrant entrepreneurship through various modes of involvement within it. Previous studies demonstrated that the family acts as a reference point at all stages of entrepreneurial venturing, including the creation stage for exploring business ideas, obtaining financial support, and making decisions (Bagwell 2015; Kloosterman et al. 2016; Evansluong and Ramírez-Pasillas 2019; Ljungkvist and Boers 2023). This significance extends to the organisational stage, where, for instance, recruiting labour within the family helps to cut management costs (Ram et al. 2008). Ultimately, *family social capital* (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Astrachan and Shanker 2003; Tata and Prasad 2015) is a resource for entrepreneurial performance, especially in migratory contexts, where limited knowledge of the new local reality fuels dependence on family or community networks.

The case of P2, like other experiences revealed in this research, was a significant example of how relationships nurtured within a close-knit network facilitated immediate access to material and immaterial resources. These included financial resources, motivational support, and professional referrals, which contributed to opening a business focused on repairing and selling electronic devices (Figure 2).

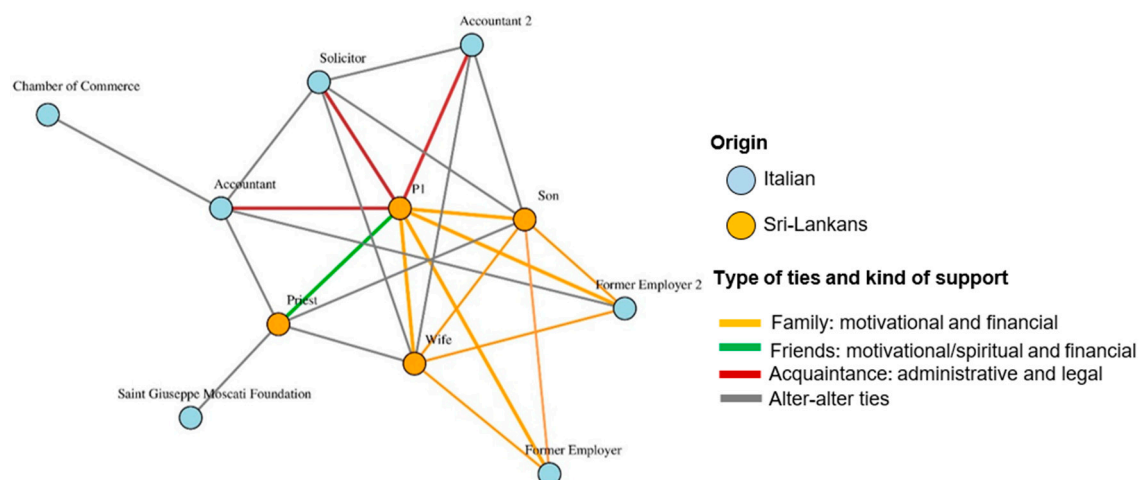


Figure 2. The close-knit network of P1.

Upon arriving in Naples in the 1980s, P1 obtained a job as a caregiver, despite his master's degree in electronic engineering. He spent about 15 years in the service of two Neapolitan families, establishing relationships of mutual respect and affection. These same relationships were helpful when P1 decided to invest his skills in more satisfying employment. The decision to set up his own business matured with the birth of his first child, and it was also a response to the difficulties he encountered in the employment market and the lack of recognition of his academic qualifications in Italy. According to the *blocked mobility* thesis (Bonacich 1973), the enterprise initiative is a response to the discrimination encountered in the possibility of social and employment mobility.

The family emerged as the principal provider of support by helping in terms of emotional and financial support. Support for P1 extended from the nuclear family to the extended family, including former employers. Hence, while his wife contributed to savings by continuing to work in domestic collaboration, the families for which P1 had previously worked were willing to support his project with a modest loan and introduce him to some accountants. After a year and a half, using this pocket of savings, he signed a lease and opened his own office. However, financial capital was insufficient at this early stage to purchase all the necessary work equipment. In addition, a lack of knowledge of regulations and bureaucratic trials caused further delays. For these reasons, P1 turned to the parish priest of the Sri Lankan community, who became a crucial resource. The priest made a grant through the San Giuseppe Moscati Foundation and interceded with the accountant to formalise P1's request. Henceforth, P1 was able to capitalise on resources and expand his network of connections with other Neapolitan professionals, who supported him in all stages of starting a business, including facilitating agreements with the Chamber of Commerce.

Some descriptive statistics of the network confirmed the behaviour of P1 in pursuing his business project. This network consisted of 13 nodes and 56 ties (size) and illustrated the active role of the close-knit network. The E-I index⁴ values for the formal–informal and out–in partitions explained this result. The first partition included all relationships established with the institution and local stakeholders (formal) and those within the close-knit network (informal). The second partition involved all the relationships that referred to the ethnic group (in) and externally with the locals (out). The homophily values (E-I index) confirmed that P1 realised his entrepreneurial project by leveraging his informal relationships (−0.571) and connections outside the Sri Lankan community (0.429).

As it emerged from P1's experience, like the other six Sri Lankan entrepreneurs, the domestic partnership within Neapolitan families fed the feeling of belonging to an extended family. These relationships often acted as a *glue* for socio-economic integration, enabling

immigrants to receive practical assistance for their needs, such as language acquisition, regularising their legal status, obtaining loans, and achieving labour mobility.

6.2. “Multifocality” Network

Entrepreneurial activities of immigrants reflect particular territorial and social configurations. In this sense, immigrants are greatly influenced by external constraints, such as the market opportunities and regulatory frameworks of the receiving contexts, as they can shape nascent ventures by leveraging individual skills and accessing resources and information by establishing contacts of different kinds (Kloosterman 2010; Rath and Schutjens 2016; Solano et al. 2022). As with the other 10 experiences collected, the second case refers to R4’s enterprise strategy (Figure 3), which leveraged various local and transnational channels to set up her business.

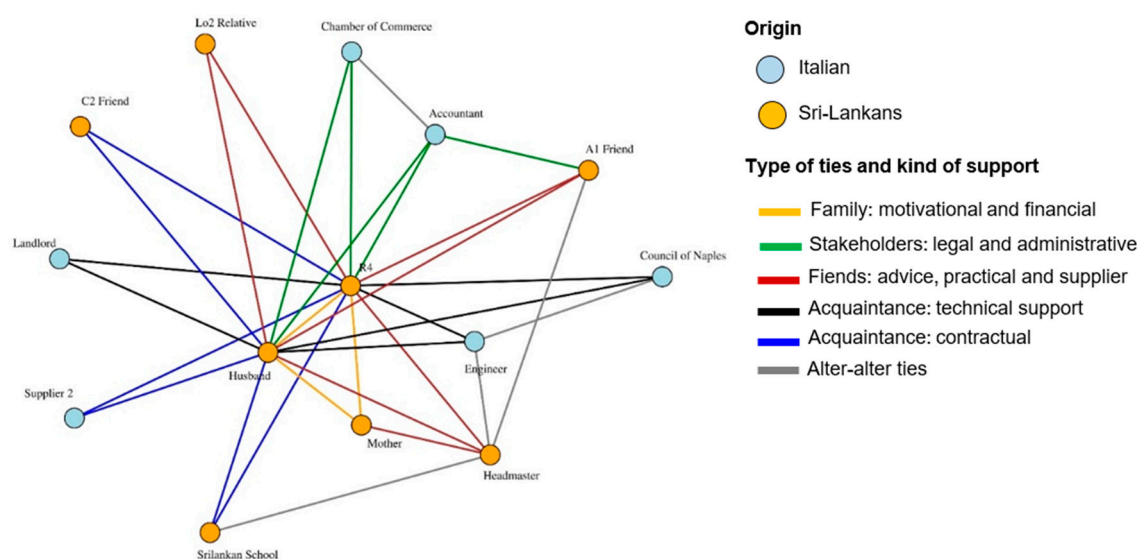


Figure 3. The multifocality network of R4.

The ego network of R4 had a size of 14 nodes and 63 ties. However, it is worth noting that many nodes and ties can be both a resource and a constraint for entrepreneurship. In the former case, it indicates a socialising profile of the ego that is capable of accessing diverse resources through multiple channels (Storti 2018). In the latter case, it reflects the difficulties encountered in realising projects, and thus, the involvement of several actors. Such explanations are not mutually exclusive, and the case of R4 provides an emblematic example of how social actors help to overcome the limitations encountered in the territory. The ego-network weaved together community relations and Neapolitan ties, all crucial in providing support. Moreover, the roles of R4 and her husband were structurally equivalent within the ego network since both had the same number of adjacent nodes with the same type of ties (Lorrain and White 1971). From a sociological point of view, this structural feature of the network denoted both a resource and a constraint. On the one hand, a pair (of actors) sharing similar attitudes and opinions best finalises the entrepreneurial strategies. On the other, structurally equivalent positions denote a relationship that is not very beneficial because it leads towards redundant and poorly capitalised information, as opposed to what those relationships established in other social circles would do (Burt 2000). This ego network was distinguished by its significant values of *structural holes* (Burt 1992) built on the effective size measure⁵ (10.04) that confirmed the presence of non-redundant contacts in the networks. To put it another way, egos of this type transform networks into devices to be consciously manipulated for their own ends (Watts 1999, p. 495) by occupying structural holes. R4’s ego-network revealed that occupying a strategic position in a network structure means gaining access to various social environments to draw essential resources.

When R4 thought of starting her own business, she figured she would do something new and different from the Sri Lankan grocery stores, minimarkets, takeaways, or travel agencies already in town. The idea of a stationery store that would sell Sri Lankan school books that were not readily stocked was born to meet the ethnic demand. Also, the focus was on attracting local customers for stationery, city transportation fares (Unico Campania), and mobile top-ups. In this regard, the role played by others (alters) was interesting to examine at different project stages. In the ideation stage, besides the support of her own family, R4 received strong encouragement from the headmaster of the Naples-based Sri Lankan school, who appreciated the project and assured her full support. However, the first delays occurred during setting up the commercial space due to a warehouse with infrastructural insecurities rented at a competitive price. R4 contacted the municipality's technical department and applied for a use conversion to resolve such issues. After several unsuccessful attempts, the headmaster put them in touch with an engineer in charge of restructuring the premises, who would also manage the relations with the competent offices. At the same time, through a compatriot, namely, A1, R4 entrusted an accountant to handle arrangements for registering the business with the Chamber of Commerce.

When the stationery store was finally inaugurated, the Sri Lankan school actively promoted it among students and families, leading to R4 receiving numerous orders. R4 established new relationships with local suppliers for printing support and stationery. Additionally, her network extended to transnational trade with her friend C2 and brother-in-law Lo2, who were the main suppliers of schoolbooks in the Sinhalese language. This network confirmed that a business strategy can be defined using the concept of *multifocality*, namely, the simultaneous involvement of migrant entrepreneurs in multiple places and multiple groups that influence their business opportunities (Solano 2016; Solano et al. 2022). In other words, the migrant entrepreneurs transcended the limitations of a single place or group, actively participating in various contexts. Multifocality underscored a comprehensive strategy, allowing the migrants to thrive in multiple locations and diverse communities. This diversification fosters expanded business prospects, as well as their network. Ultimately, multifocality emerged as a defining aspect of migrant entrepreneurial strategies, facilitating the utilisation of diverse contexts and relationships for entrepreneurial success.

7. Conclusions

Cities are the places most directly involved in the integration challenge and provide a testing ground for building an interethnic society. This study demonstrated, through the results of fieldwork, how the neighbourhood-based approach was effective for exploring the trajectories of integration of Sri Lankans in Rione Sanità in Naples. A key starting point was to consider the neighbourhood as a contextual factor, not of secondary importance, in determining the trajectories of immigrants' housing and economic and social integration.

Specifically, it was observed that integration was often the result of the interaction between immigrants and the urban context, highlighting how places became crucial in providing opportunities for economic and relational integration. Such interactions acted as a vehicle for various forms of social support, which fed integration dynamics.

The results show how the physical and social infrastructures created fertile conditions for the inclusion of Sri Lankans in the neighbourhood. Housing integration features vertical segregation, laying a basis for the social mix between social groups with different backgrounds. As a result of recent urban transformations, which have made the neighbourhood attractive to tourists and new residents, this coexistence did not seem to suffer significantly. Rather, the gradual exit from previous forms of urban and social decay created ideal conditions for reactivating local commerce, even acting as a stimulus for Sri Lankan entrepreneurship.

However, exploring Sri Lankan entrepreneurial trajectories revealed uncertain outcomes in terms of integration due to two key aspects. The first was that Sri Lankan businesses had a weak profile, which was attributable to a poor entrepreneurial culture, exposing them to the risk of failure in the long run. They were self-employed businesses

limited to the sale of goods and services within the community, limiting the profit margins that would result from expanding their customer base.

Moreover, the analysis of entrepreneurial networks revealed how these pathways often develop informally to fill gaps in the understanding of concrete regulatory mechanisms and to access economic resources otherwise unavailable, as in the case of banking channels. Social capital, which extended beyond the ethnic group by involving friends, local, and transnational acquaintances, played a major role in these dynamics.

The second aspect concerned considerations about the whole city, which appeared to be inadequately equipped to support and enhance immigrants' entrepreneurial paths through targeted counselling and support services. In this context, more critical issues emerged regarding the capacity of local authorities and non-governmental agencies to respond to the needs of aspiring entrepreneurs. These difficulties translated into a demand for assistance aimed at local professionals who acted as mediators with the territory, especially in dealing with the administrative and legal requirements needed to start a business.

In general, the results of this research highlight the fragility of integration policies, both at the national level in Italy, where a coherent strategy is lacking, and at the local level, where interventions, albeit existing, primarily focus on initial reception needs. These include programs for placement in reception centres, healthcare assistance, Italian language classes, and regularisation of legal status. However, considering that cities serve as permanent destinations for the foreign population, it is crucial to provide support during the entire migration process. In Naples, urban integration policies are deficient in addressing the concrete pathways to socio-economic inclusion for immigrants.

As a result, prioritising the design of more targeted policies and interventions, in collaboration with local institutions and third-sector associations, to overcome the narrowness of primary services and promote immigrant empowerment is crucial. For instance, it might be necessary to invest in a more varied service offering, including professional workshops, know-how, support in business design, access to microcredit, and training in taxation for sustaining entrepreneurship. Such an approach would benefit not only immigrants interested in self-employment but also the entire urban context. Besides economic returns, it might serve as a resource for enhancing neighbourhoods experiencing social, cultural, and economic challenges.

This research, on the one hand, contributes to advancing the understanding of a field that is still underexplored in the Neapolitan context, offering valuable insights to guide the evolving integration trajectories of the Sri Lankan community. On the other hand, it aligns with the framework of the neighbourhood-based approach, emphasising the importance of adopting strategies that consider the specific dynamics of the neighbourhood to analyse and promote authentic social and economic inclusion of immigrants, fostering comparisons with other territorial contexts.

In addition, this research presented limitations that might be considered as starting points for future investigations. The low participation of women in self-employment requires empirical attention, considering gender inequalities and cultural factors. A more in-depth investigation into the weaknesses of the territory, including the influence of broader institutional and regulatory factors on the entrepreneurial dynamics of immigrants, would be relevant. Another worthy area of inquiry pertains to the sustainability of businesses over time, aiming to understand the determining factors of their survival or mortality. Lastly, the comparison between the initiatives promoted by migrant communities; local initiatives; and active forces in society, both political and economic, should be paid attention to.

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Notes

- ¹ Source: Tutto Italia. Demographic statistics. Foreign residents in Naples, last update on 1st January 2023. Available online: www.tuttoitalia.it (accessed on 18 November 2023).
- ² Source: Demographic statistics. The foreign resident population, last update on 2016. Statistics Office, Naples City Council, Available online: www.comune.napoli.it, accessed on 22 November 2023.
- ³ Before the closure imposed by the lockdown due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.
- ⁴ The E-I (external–internal) index, introduced by Krackhardt and Stern in 1988, is calculated by subtracting the number of ties between group members from the number of ties to outsiders and then dividing by the total number of ties. The index ranges from −1 (indicating entirely internal ties) to +1 (signifying exclusively external ties).
- ⁵ *Effective size of the network (EffSize)* is the number of alters that ego has, minus the average number of ties that each alter has to other alters (Hanneman and Riddle 2005).

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