

Article

Sustainable Business Model Innovation vs. “Made in” for International Performance of Italian Food Companies

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Abstract: The quality of Italian food products, linked to Made in, has always been a competitive driver within foreign markets. However, today, getting quality choices also means engaging in responsible behavior. The paper investigates the relation between the choice of environmental and social standards and the international performance of a set of agri-food firms in Italy, examined through the multiple case study method and the tools of qualitative methodology. What role do standards play in attributing an added value to the quality of agroindustry products and differentiating sustainable products in foreign markets, thereby improving the international performance of the companies? These questions are investigated by the research in this paper. The results of the research show a significant correlation, in the interviewed companies, between corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, with reference to the adoption of standards, and international competitiveness, measured in terms of market performance as it regards the growth of foreign demand and opening to new markets.

Keywords: quality; sustainability; food; standards; international performance; food policy



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1. Introduction

The phrase “Made in Italy” on food products has always attested to the quality of Italian products, very often anchored to specific territorial areas and marked by brands that ensure production techniques linked to tradition. It represents a differentiating factor of the offers and affects the performance of Italian companies in the sector.

In international marketing studies, the concept of made in describes, on the one hand, the influence exercised by information about the origin of products in the consumer purchasing process and, on the other hand, the possibility for companies—thanks to a productive tradition that qualifies the country of origin—to amplify the competitive advantage of national offers on international markets [1–3]. Recent studies have examined the perceptions of a product’s country-of-origin and the consumers’ ethnocentrism as variables relevant to the marketing of food products in foreign markets [4].

The possibility of enhancing the geographical origin has allowed many small industrial companies to use the territory to differentiate their products from those of competitors and to consolidate their presence abroad.

The Italian agro-industrial business, and in particular that of the Campania region, is characterized by many protected products. In Campania, there are about 30 DOC, DOCG, and DOP products, and more than 300 traditional products of different local areas. This acronym refers to products Denomination of Check Origin, Denomination of Check and Guaranteed Origin, Denomination of Protect Origin, Typical Geographic indication. Among the agricultural products is the Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) chestnut of Montella and Serino, the IGP Annurca apple, the San Marzano Tomato of Agro Sarnese-Nocerino, the copper onion of Montoro, and hazelnuts and cherries, while, among foodstuff productions, is the buffalo mozzarella and the pasta of Gragnano.

The other feature of the Campania sector is the existence of farms, compared to the biological production of the foods (plantation and livestock), the promotion of biodiversity, and the usage and/or salvage of local species. These companies engage in more activities,

following models of business in which coexist different activities, from the selling of the products to the food services, social and didactic farms, and also touristic and recreational activities, in a rural development approach based on the protection of the environment and health and of bio-cultural heritage.

The identification of the products' details and the qualities of the agri-food asserts a strong inclination for the export of regional products, which were worth over 3 billion Euros in 2018, with a growth of 3.6% from 2017 (Coldiretti dates on Istat dates).

Today, the concept of Made in Italy and the "narration of the place"—being able to reflect distinctive abilities and skills, with the value heritage of a territory also linked to the "interpenetration" between daily life and industrial reality [5–7]—in recalling food quality [8–10], although very structured and protected, seems to no longer be sufficient for Italian firms' competitiveness in foreign markets, and food quality is increasingly associated with sustainability. Getting quality choices means following the "responsible" and right ways. Attention to the issue of sustainability in the agro-food industry is gradually growing because of the impacts of agro-food industry activities on the environment and society and the growing interest of consumers and governments in food production [11–15]. The main topics on sustainability, generated by the food industry, can be classified into three spheres of sustainability: from the environmental point of view (soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, inefficient use of water resources and land use, use of chemicals, emission of gases harmful to the environment), the social point of view (exploitation of labor, impact on the health and well-being of consumers), and the economic point of view (impact on smaller production entities). In addition to these aspects, ethical questions are linked to animal welfare and the effects of some productions on the natural systems.

So, today, the issue of sustainability in agroindustry supply is relevant because it creates significant impacts in terms of food safety, the environmental sustainability of the production, and responsible consumption. Consistent with increasing societal expectations, companies are reorienting their production and business models, promoting sustainability, and focusing on the realization of products with an environmental and/or social value, involving the whole supply chain [16–18]. Some studies emphasized food companies' commitment to sustainability as a response to the needs of consumers [16,19,20] and the need to differentiate their products from competitors [21–23].

This paper aims to analyze the role that CSR practices may play in order to attribute a high quality to the agri-food products, as competitive leverage for entering a foreign market and building customer loyalty. The analysis focuses on the role of the environmental and/or social standards as a driver of international competition, measured by the growing foreign demand for sustainable products and the opening through new markets, with a specific aim to fill a knowledge gap in the relation between sustainability standards and international performances.

The theoretical debate analyzed various trajectories: the links between CSR practices and consumers' perspective and attitude towards buying [24–26]; the impact on foreign markets [27] and on the international performance of companies [28–30]; the importance of CSR communication on consumers' positive attitudes and behavioral intentions [26]; and the link between the existence of a domestic certification body and the impact on cross-national adoption [31]. In addition, some studies explored the effect of food safety requirements on food imports [32–34] and food exports, examining firms' export sales performance in different countries [35,36]; other studies found that previous trade relationships seem to influence the adoption of certifications and that certification at the country level is influenced by many historical, macroeconomic, and institutional determinants [37].

The paper focuses on a little-investigated aspect: the role of standards as an expression of a process of accumulation of technical and managerial skills that feed innovative processes and improve product quality. It describes the contribution of standards in agri-food companies to differentiate the offers, characterizing them with an environmental and/or social value in international markets, and to improve international performance, relative to the growth of foreign demand and openness to new markets for sustainable products.

The paper also intends to contribute to the formation of a greater awareness of the factors that determine the performance of agri-food companies in international markets, offering information to support the policies that promote foreign trade of Italian food companies.

The first part of the paper regards a desk analysis on the aim of the study; the secondary part shows the results of the empirical study, conducted through the multiple case study, as well as the discussions and conclusions.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Sustainability, Innovation, and Competitiveness: What Links Are Investigated in the Literature?

The concepts of sustainability, innovation, and competitiveness are investigated in the theoretical debate which has examined the different relations in depth.

Many studies have reviewed the link between CSR and performances, examining the possibilities of CSR practices to improve the companies' competitiveness [38–41]. From this perspective, some studies have analyzed the positive impact produced on the costs and risks of companies [42,43] and the effects on the best propensity of stakeholders [44,45] and the positive internal climate of the company, not only in terms of reducing costs related to employee management but also as an attractor of new human capital [46,47]. Others positively valued the impact on consumer satisfaction, which can also be translated as an increase of the ethical segments [48,49]. Still, others have deepened the link between sustainability and international performance [28,29], emphasizing, in some cases, the weight of the innovations caused by CSR practices.

A specific theoretical branch has examined the link between CSR and performance in small and medium companies, deepening the positive impact on human resources management [30,50,51]. Finally, it should be noted that not all researchers agree that a positive connection exists [52,53].

Another important branch of study has examined the relation between CSR and innovation. From this perspective, most of the research conforms to the thesis that sustainability inspires innovation: It operates in the definition of new models of business, new ways to work, new processes, and new products [54]. It outlines new opportunities of the market and identifies new components of demand [55]. In addition, it requires the regeneration of resources, business skills, and competitive factors [41,56]. The adoption of responsible behaviors implies a review of the corporate policies that affect all company areas (production, marketing, finance, human resources, etc.) [57].

With reference to specific sectors, some studies have investigated the drivers of sustainable innovation [58], providing indications of the impacts in business models also considering the small and medium-sized actors [59,60].

At the same time, in a relationship of mutual influence, it was emphasized that innovation is the key factor to pursue sustainability [61] and that, often, the failure of certain choices derives from low levels of sustainable innovation or from occasional initiatives not adequately programmed [62].

With particular regard to CSR practices related to obtaining standards, the theoretical debate highlights the important role exercised by the standards in guiding companies to improve their performance [62–65], as well as underlining a positive correlation with innovation: The adoption of environmental and/or social certifications feeds the accumulation of knowledge and technical and managerial skills that supports the process and product innovation [49,66,67].

Other studies suggest the effects produced by this relationship in terms of social benefits for all [23,68–70]. It is not surprising that the issue of sustainability is no longer understood as a philanthropic issue but has become an asset of the core business [71–74], identifying a new business model, a strategy to compete, a factor to differentiate offers, and a competitive lever on international markets.

2.2. Sustainable Quality of Italian Food Products for International Performance

The good performance of Italian food products in international markets is attributed to their higher quality, often characterized by brands that ensure the origin and production techniques linked to tradition (DOC, DOP, IGP, etc.). The quality of food products appears as the key element capable of determining success in foreign markets and concerns, not only specific brands, but often the whole offer that distinguishes the typical products of Made in Italy [75].

Several studies in the marketing literature have identified, in the preferences for local food products and food quality labels, the factors that influence customers' decision-making process when purchasing food products [76,77].

The relation between the quality of products in the agri-food sector and the international competitiveness of companies has been explored in various studies, starting with those that have elaborated data on international trade [78–81]. The results of these studies seem to highlight the role of the innovative skills of companies (8% of turnover is invested in research and development) which support non-price competition strategies in the sector [82,83]. Furthermore, innovation does not seem to be limited to processes alone [84] but is sought in the alignment of strategies and objectives among the actors in the supply chain [85,86].

Determining factors for the international success of Italian food products are, therefore, the quality and the differentiation of the products which, in addition to being attributable to innovation, stem from the values of tradition, from the reliability settled over time by companies, from the fertilization between the product and its territory, from the charm of Italy which weighs particularly on food products, and from the “preparation” of the Italian consumer. Ultimately, it depends on a set of interdependent components that contribute to the formation of a quality that has been defined as “organic” [75].

Today's context, however, imposes new challenges, from the issue of climate change to food safety and the dignity of man in the manufacturing processes, which change the behaviors in demand, making the Made in Italy brand for food products no longer sufficiently successful abroad and drawing companies' attention to these new trends. The issue of food safety, for example, is no longer limited to the conditions of raw materials, but research shows that an increasing share of consumers perceive the quality of the product in terms of its main effect on health, thus favoring the absence (and not the simple reduction) of ingredients [75].

At the same time, some research finds that Italy holds an excellent position compared to other European and non-European countries, registering fewer products with chemical residues (0.5%, lower share of the European average of 1.6% and the average of non-EU products of 5.7%) [87]. On the supply front, the Italian food sector is subjected to various pressures too. From below, there is competition from producers capable of ensuring high levels of productivity, accompanied by lower costs and competitive prices; from above, there are large international companies able to ensure differentiation strategies and with strong communication skills.

These challenges require Italian companies, if not to optimize productivity and costs, to choose the path of improving the quality of products, paying attention to the evolution of market needs. In this line, interest in food safety and the environmental and social value of processes and products seems to be a path consistent with the legitimate demands of a society increasingly sensitive to these issues, but at the same time, it is a path that allows for the renewal of distinctive features of the Italian offer and for supporting the competitiveness of Italian products in international markets.

Recent research has shown that, in advanced foreign markets, attention to the sustainability of food products with regard to processes, products, and methods of distribution and use is very strong and is one of the priority evaluation criteria for distributors and the final consumer [75]; at the same time, research on the production of Campania [23] has highlighted, among the main reasons to adopt sustainable innovations, the penetration into new foreign markets, as well as the compliance with the regulations of the sector,

mainly foreign. The strong awareness of the importance of sustainability and the safety of food products emerge in the sector as parameters of choice in the purchasing processes, especially by foreign customers, as well as the strong conviction of the need to create agri-food chains with low environmental impact, in order to achieve benefits in terms of positive externalities on the community and the reputational strengthening of companies and territories [23].

The interventions in the “sustainable” quality of the food sector involve the adoption of a precise business model that contemplates innovation, which supports processes and the products’ quality and tradition, which in turn enhances the typical products and the territorial excellencies. These interventions cover many areas, from the protection of the soil and biodiversity, to the efficient use of water resources, to the reduction in the use of chemicals and harmful gas emissions, to energy efficiency and the use of renewable sources, to the reduction or recovery of production waste, and to the use of recyclable packaging, which at the same time guarantees the healthiness of the product, etc., from an environmental point of view. From a social perspective, the actions cover the best working conditions, to transparency towards the consumer and other stakeholders, to traceability, to food education for correct consumption, etc. In an ethical dimension, the issues are related mainly to animal welfare and the effects of some productions on natural systems.

For the implementation of this model, it is necessary to equalize the strategies and objectives among the actors in the supply chain [85,86] to enable effective communication between the actors and implement coordinated operational solutions throughout the production chain [88,89]. The knowledge sharing in the supply chain is a key factor in order to favor the achievement of higher levels of transparency among economic actors and to increase consumer confidence [90–92].

Focusing on sustainable quality to be successful in international markets also means intense communication with the market and educating the consumer about proper food consumption even before guiding them in making responsible purchase choices. Studies reveal differences in consumer behavior internationally, but clear communication to the market is considered a strategic asset for informing and influencing consumer behavior [26,27]. In this direction, the traceability of products and the validation of their sustainable quality can be achieved by obtaining environmental and social standards [90].

The standards guide the improvements that companies must achieve in the environmental impacts of their processes, products, and services, and in the restructuring of supply chain relationships [93], as well as the mere fact that respecting these standards is considered a sufficient motivation to behave in a socially responsible way [94].

The adoption of standards, for all the implications in rethinking products and business processes, guides product, process, and organization sustainable innovation, and feeds the accumulation of knowledge and technical and managerial skills that support innovative processes [49], also guiding companies in improving their financial performance [64,95].

The first discriminating element to change in favor of sustainability is attributed to the ability of companies to invest in adequate resources, from both quantitative and qualitative points of view [96]. However, it should be noted that these major investments “are covered” in foreign markets, where the higher quality corresponds to the willingness to pay a higher price for competitor products; the responsible quality food products would also fall into that category of luxury products for which, among other things, increasing sales rates are expected (+6%) [97].

For smaller companies, investments and costs related to sustainability can be addressed through a collaborative approach. Many studies insist on the importance of networks and belonging to industrial districts or other forms of associations to harness a wide range of capacities and to reposition and regenerate when faced with competitive challenges such as sustainability [98]. Agrifood cooperatives play an important role in the aggregation of different skills and abilities that create a critical mass to face investments and the costs of sustainability, allowing even the smallest companies to participate [41,99]. Often, participation in a specific network strongly directs the behavior of companies and the

sustainability choices pursued: sharing the same values and principles, small companies draw together voluntarily to develop and implement sustainability actions that minimize individual efforts and maximize the efficiency of individual projects [100,101]. Some research has also found that, where the figure of a leader company exists, it plays a central role in guiding the behavior of other companies in affecting profit and risk distribution as well as the ‘upgrading’ of other entities inside and outside the chain [102].

The sustainable business model, in agri-food companies, must go hand in hand with the search for a balance with the productive tradition, with the excellence of the territories and the uniqueness of the products. The agri-food companies, and in particular those of quality, must adopt a model that points to the coexistence of tradition, innovation, and sustainability, and they must invest in the development of innovative trajectories aimed at improving the “responsible” quality level in the supply chains.

Then, to the traditional relationship, the quality of food products, or territorial values, and international competitiveness are added to the sustainability-innovation-competitiveness relationship; in other words, the quality can be enriched with a sustainable value, innovation is key to responding to sustainability [61], sustainability often becomes the condition for which new ideas are born [103], and, finally, sustainable innovation is a driver of competitiveness for foreign markets (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Quality-sustainability-international performance relationships.

2.3. Methodology of the Empirical Research

The case studies are composed of agri-food companies in Campania. The Campania region is characterized by many protected products. There are about 30 DOC, DOCG, and DOP products, and more than 300 traditional products of different local areas.

The quality of the products and the recognition of their specificity support the turnover of the regional sector, the leader in the south (33.3%) (data—2019) [104], and the strong export propensity of the regional products which recorded growth of foreign turnover also in the last year (+3.6% compared to 2017) and which represent about 44% of all exports of the south.

The case studies are composed of agri-food companies in Campania that present, in their commercial offer, sustainability products with environmental and/or social value. The companies analyzed in the research are: Bioagriworld, GMF Oliviero F.lli, La Doria, La Torrente, Oleificio Dell’Orto, Pastificio Lucio Garofalo, Pastificio Antonio Pallante, and Rummo.

The study, carried out between November and June 2019, is part of a bigger research project that investigated the necessity of innovation sustainability in the agroindustrial sector in Campania.

The analysis in the paper is concerned in particular with the study of CSR practices, with regard to the standards adopted, the motivations/benefits identified in their adoption, and the market response to sustainable products, with the aim of investigating the relationship between sustainability standards and international performance in terms of growth in foreign demand and entry into new markets.

Companies’ information was collected with a qualitative survey (explanatory and descriptive) which used the investigation technique with the administration of a semi-structured questionnaire through direct interviews with the companies’ representatives [105,106]. It also used documentary research through the consultation of company documents and institutional websites.

In detail, the questionnaire intended to guide the interview on: sustainability issues (projects, initiatives, and strategies carried out), the performance of sustainable products in foreign markets, the motivations and benefits obtained, and the drivers of sustainable innovation. The interview protocol was structured into three parts: introduction and presentation of the research; interview phase; and storytelling of the interviewees.

3. Results

The companies analyzed are typical companies of the Made in Italy food chains (pasta, tomato, oil, preserves, sweets), strongly oriented towards exports (in 50% of cases with turnover percentages of over 60%) and with an extensive presence abroad covering the territories from Europe, the Americas, and the countries of Asia (Table 1).

Table 1. Case studies.

Company	Foreign Turnover	Main Foreign Markets	Sustainable Products	Production Specifications/Standards
Bioagriworld	70%	USA, Canada, West Europe, Australia.	Canned tomato, sustainable packaging.	Slow Food Pomodoro San Marzano Defense; DOP Pomodoro San Marzano Agro Nocerino-Sarnese; IT BIO 006; BRC Food Certificated.
GMF Oliviero F.lli	35%	Germany, United Kingdom, USA, Canada, Belgium, Slovenia, Croatia, South Africa, Georgia, Australia, Japan.	UTZ chocolate, Bio Line, sustainable packaging.	UTZ certified; FAIR TRADE; BRC Food Certificated; IFS; IT BIO 006; ISO 9001.
La Doria	77%	Northern Europe (UK, Germany, Scandinavian countries), Australia, New Zealand, Japan.	Tomato products, canned legumes and pasta, ready-made sauces, juices, and fruit drinks.	Integrated Production Regulations; ISO 14001; BRC; IT BIO 009; IFS; ISO 9001; ISO26000; OHSAS 18001; Kosher; ISO 26000; Ethical Code, Social report.
La Torrente	22%	France, USA, Japan.	Canned tomato, sustainable packaging.	ISO 9001; ISO 14000 Certification of Agri-Food Product (– Level 2 Stp-ce-pc-agro_11); ISO 10939:2001; ISO 11233; ISO 22005; IT BIO 006; Halal; Kosher; BRC Food Certificated; IFS; SA 8000; ISO 14001; VEGANOK.
Oleificio Dell’Orto	30–40%	USA, Japan, Switzerland, Germany. Market niches in France and Sweden.	DOP and BIO olive oil.	DOP Salernitane Hills; Biological EU; JAS; USDA Organic; Saponi di Campania.
Pastificio Lucio Garofalo	62%	USA, United Kingdom, France, Portugal, Canada, Spain, Somalia, Rwanda, Mali.	Organic pasta, whole-wheat pasta, sustainable packaging.	SA8000; OHSAS 18001; ISO 14001; ISO 50001; BRC Food Certificated; IFS; Ethical Code; Social report; IGP label.
Pastificio Pallante	60%	Germany, United Kingdom, USA, France, Canada, Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Libya, Japan.	Pasta with organic semolina.	ISO 9001; ISO 14001; ISO 22005; SA 8000I; IFS; Kosher; AIAB; BRC Global Standard.
Rummo	25%	United Kingdom, USA, Germany, Japan, Australia.	Slow kneading dough, organic pasta.	Disciplinary Slow Pasta Processing; IT BIO; Ethical Code.

In recent years, these companies have invested in the production and sale of sustainable products. These are organic lines, products made with an environmental and social value, testified by standards given by external bodies, and products with sustainable packaging (see Table 1).

All the companies analyzed have growing turnover and, in some cases, state the appreciation of foreign demand for the “responsible” quality of the products, especially if certified, as well as the importance of referring to the territory of origin (Oleificio dell’Orto, Bioagriworld, Rummo, GMF Oliviero F.lli). They declare that the foreign markets are growing fast: The responses provided by companies, as shown in Figure 2, notice positive trends in foreign sales of sustainable products. The incidence of turnover achieved by sustainable products in smaller companies is also significant, confirming the thesis that sustainable products represent an important competitive factor for small businesses—a factor that further differentiates the quality product.

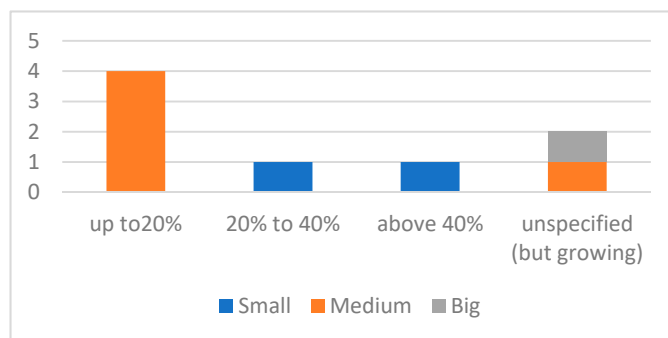


Figure 2. The response of sustainable products on the foreign market (% of total turnover).

With regard to the factors that prompted companies to adopt CSR practices (see Figure 3), the survey shows that companies assign great importance to penetration into new markets and the positive impact on image. In some cases, the reason is linked to corporate values and culture. Sometimes there is an explicit request from actors of foreign trade and large retailers, as well as compliance with regulatory obligations that initially led companies to invest in low-environmental-impact production processes (for example, the push towards a lower use of pesticides and herbicides for the protection of the territory and a general greater respect for the surrounding environment).

With regard to the benefits obtained, companies describe the following main benefits: entry into new markets, customer loyalty, and social and image consensus (see Figure 4).

The companies that combine sustainability in their strategies are perceived by the clients as more trustworthy and more careful about the requirements of the consumer. Thus, for the companies interviewed, the sustainability of the food supply chain is considered an important competitive element to increase customer loyalty and successfully establish themselves in foreign markets (Table 2).

In some cases, it is the adherence to the obligations that initially led companies to undertake processes with low environmental impact, for example, the push towards a lower use of pesticides and herbicides for the protection of the territory and, in general, a greater respect of the surrounding environment (Bioagriworld, GMF Oliviero F.lli, La Torrente). In addition, some micro-enterprises belong to associative forms and are strongly guided in their choices by the respect of sustainable production regulations, benefiting from the possibility of experimenting with these choices in a collaborative approach.

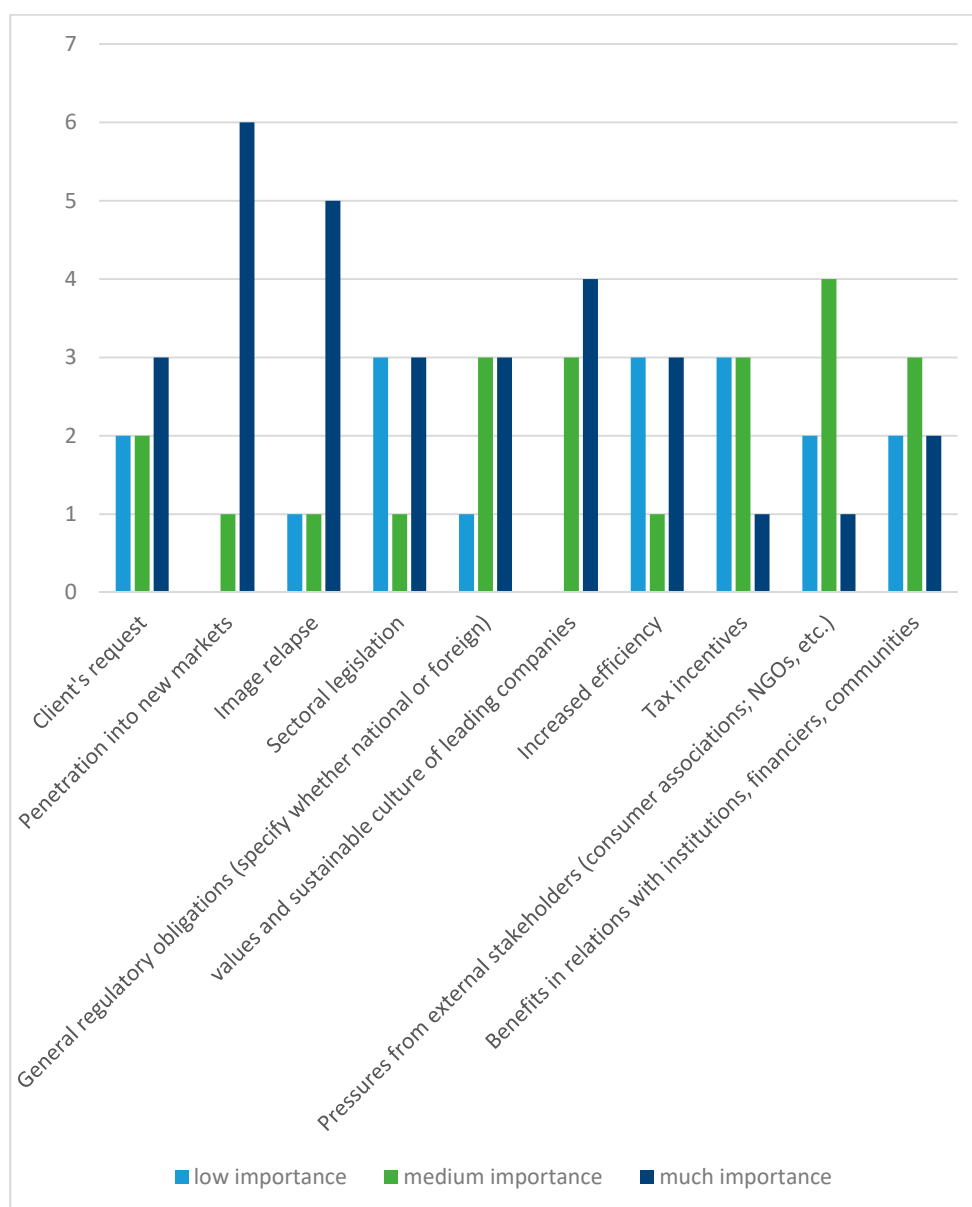


Figure 3. Companies' reasons to adopt sustainability initiatives/projects.

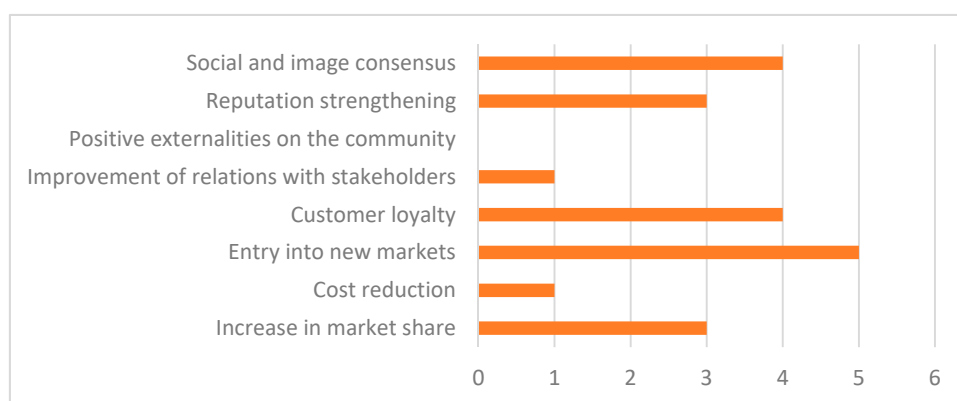


Figure 4. Benefits.

Table 2. Statements by the companies interviewed.

“Among the reasons that have induced and, in the future, could induce the company to adopt initiatives and projects of sustainability include the greater ease of penetration into new markets, the increase in efficiency and general regulatory obligations, especially abroad; the tax incentives and the client’s demand contributed very little” (Bioagriworld).
“For our company it is an opportunity to support the reputation of Made in Italy with the demand for security and guarantee that comes from the consumer. The certified products are a guarantee of quality, healthiness, and food safety” (La Torrente).
“Our mission is to provide our customers with high-quality products at highly competitive prices, [an] alternative to the label . . . The choice to integrate sustainability in business processes is aimed at creating value over time for shareholders and all other stakeholders. To this end, a Sustainability Policy was formalized in 2018 which establishes the company’s commitment to contribute to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development goals formalized in the 2030 Agenda. Quality also means attention to the fundamentals of environmental and social sustainability” (La Doria).
“ . . . a creed so deeply rooted in the company’s DNA that it does not stop at the essential quality of the product. In fact, Garofalo has long wondered about how it is possible to maintain and improve the quality of the environment in which it operates by minimizing the environmental impact of its factory. Garofalo has pursued its own ‘label policy,’ a more attractive corporate image that has facilitated its positioning on foreign markets” (Pasta Garofalo).
“The reasons that led the company to adopt sustainability practices are many. First of all, the customer’s requests were answered, in particular for foreign markets. In fact, the production of the Bio Line was dictated by the demands of a substantial market share, interested in particular products” (GMF Oliviero F.lli).
“ . . . the main benefit is certainly the opening of new markets that can be quite complex. The improvement of our image towards stakeholders and the national and international territory is undeniable” (Rummo).
“If Italian agriculture wants to move forward, it cannot do without sustainability and bio policies. Research and sustainability are the key words . . . in bio productions they are an indispensable weapon . . . opening them to foreign markets, and to be more competitive . . . if it is not the hope of receiving financial aid that drives the company to pursue sustainable policies [it] is the effective opening in foreign markets, such as America or Japan. The clients’ package also includes restaurants, small shops, [and] foreign importers who are looking for the true quality Made in Italy” (Olificio Dell’Orto).

Compared to the CSR practices adopted and the tools used, the survey found that companies present some common factors. First, companies follow some production specifications that regulate production methods from a sustainable perspective and on which they are aiming to integrate sustainability within their competitive strategies (Table 3).

Table 3. Sustainability guidelines applied by the analyzed companies.

Production Specifications	Characteristics	Background
DOP Salernitane Hills	Oil production disciplinarys. The raw materials must come from territories with a protected origin identified in the disciplinary.	Environment and specific aspects relating to consumers.
Slow Food Pomodoro San Marzano Defense	Recovery and preservation of ancient products and production methods for small productions.	Environment and community involvement and development.
Policy document of integrated production 11233:2009	Use of raw materials with rational use of chemical products and with the integration of less impactful natural inputs.	Environment and specific aspects relating to consumers.
Disciplinary and Slow Processing Mark	Strictly handmade production method with careful selection of durum wheat.	Environment.

All the companies present labels of quality (DOP, DOC, BIO) and certifications that guarantee the sustainability modality of production in the food sector, in particular:

- UTZ, global certification addressed to the producers of tea, coffee, and cacao to ensure that primary production is implemented correctly and without inconvenience for workers and local populations;
- British Retail Consortium, a global standard to protect the quality and safety of the products proposed to the consumers by the GDO suppliers and retailers;

- The International Food Standard (IFS), an international standard to quantify and select the suppliers of foodstuff;
- The USDA Organic, which indicates that the product is recognized as organic by United States Federal Law;
- AIAB, which identifies productions related to organic farming and compliance with the principles of sustainable development.

In some cases (La Doria, La Torrente, Pastificio Pallante), the presence of the Kosher certification was recorded, certifying respect of the religious rules that dominate the nutrition of observant Jewish people, as was Halal certification for the respect of the norms of Islamic law.

Furthermore, many companies have declared that the costs they must bear to obtain the certifications represent a difficult barrier to overcome in entering new markets.

The following are select statements by the companies interviewed on the importance of CSR practices (Table 4).

Table 4. Statements by the companies interviewed.

“... in France, a law prohibits the sale of products with packaging without bisphenol. This has led La Torrente to deliberately adapt to this legislation, then extend this initiative also to the Italian market (not yet sensitive to this issue). In particular, the certifications guarantee international recognition in matters of food safety. This is the reason that led our company to certify itself as Halal and Kosher, the food certifications that guarantee respect for the Muslim and Jewish rules at the table, respectively” (La Torrente).

“... for us it means above all a culture of sustainability and a daily commitment to improve [ing] every step of the production processes. We reiterate our commitment to reduce the impacts of our activity on the environment and to sustainably manage energy resources; to optimize production processes in order to reduce waste and inefficiencies; to promote with farmers’ organizations tools and solutions to make agronomic management efficient and sustainable; to maintain high levels of quality and food safety and to improve performance in the field of [the] health and safety of workers.

We confirm our efforts to increase the use of sustainable packaging, to improve the process of enhancing human resources, to promote the circular economy. We also intend to continue to contribute to local growth and to improve dialogue with our stakeholders” (La Doria).

“Garofalo does not agree to introduce sustainability initiatives for the sole purpose of obtaining recognition within the markets. On the contrary, more often, the pasta factory does not even communicate to the customers the outcome of the certifications it has obtained or the initiatives it has chosen to support. The reasons that induce Garofalo to certify its commitment in favor of environmental and social sustainability should, rather, be sought at the level of “corporate culture”; they emanate from within, often as a result of wider choices. This does not exclude that these certifications have brought significant benefits to the Pasta Factory, nor that, in other cases, this choice may have been induced by requests made by the “distribution chains” with which one collaborates (for ex. request SA8000)” (Pasta Garofalo).

“The need for expansion and penetration in the European and overseas markets, the need for ever-higher quality standards, the need to demonstrate the high level of food safety achieved, have led the company to adopt the most important European certifications: ISO 9001: 2008, BRC and IFS. Recently the quality system has been completed and integrated with the certification for organic products and adherence to the UTZ Sustainable Cocoa certification whose purpose is the development of cocoa production in harmony with the living conditions of workers and their families” (GMF Oliviero F.lli).

Another aspect of the survey concerned company processes and the innovations required to give an environmental and/or social value to products, also in compliance with the criteria required by the standards adopted. The interviews showed that:

- the phase of procurement of raw materials is considered fundamental. Sustainable quality is sought through checks and also by carrying out inspections in the field and paying particular attention to plant nutrition and phytosanitary treatments (for example, La Doria works closely with farmers’ organizations in the search for tools and solutions to make agronomic management efficient and sustainable and to maintain high levels of quality and food safety). Some companies then request their suppliers to certify themselves as the company has;
- the production processes (plants and techniques) have been reviewed. In some cases, companies have invested in low environmental impact production plants, as in the case of the choice of the GMF Oliviero F.lli company for the production of nougat, or of plants for energy efficiency, as in the case of the Lucio Garofalo pasta factory and

the Rummo pasta factory. The latter, in particular, has equipped itself with a CCHP (Combined Cooling, Heating, and Power) that has allowed the company to reduce CO₂ emissions by 30%. La Doria has made significant investments to sustainably manage energy resources and optimize production processes to reduce waste and inefficiencies. In many cases, there are also choices of circular economy, with reference to the investments made by La Doria to recover waste and/or waste from processing. For example, tomato skins are used for animal feed and, together with seeds, they are also used as an agricultural fertilizer. Additionally, in the case of Oleificio dell'Orto, the olive pits used for the production of oil and pâté are used to feed a biomass boiler;

- product innovation, with reference to the search for both new packaging solutions and new products, has catalyzed business investments. Many companies have experimented with solutions for the sustainable packaging of products related to the healthiness of the product, the increase in shelf life, and the protection of consumer health (GMF Oliviero F.lli, Bioagriworld; Pastificio Lucio Garofalo; La Doria). For example, the La Torrente company has experimented with the use of packaging without bisphenol, a substance prohibited in France, but has extended this packaging to other markets, as well.

There are also experiments with functional products, that is, those products naturally enriched with ingredients that have beneficial and protective properties for the human organism and that carry out a preventive action on consumer health (GMF Oliviero F.lli; La Torrente).

A further result that emerges from the survey is the presence, in the analyzed companies, of a strong cultural factor with respect to the importance of sustainability, practiced in the supply chain, which will be shaped in the adoption of sustainable business models.

In other words, beyond the reasons that guide the strategic choices of companies in adopting CSR practices, the survey revealed a strong sensitivity of the interviewees to the principles of sustainable development.

4. Discussions

The results confirm the important role of CSR practices in strengthening the quality of agroindustry products, to make sustainable products recognizable in foreign markets and to improve the international performances of the companies.

The judgments of the companies agree that:

- the sustainability of agri-food supply chains is an important and essential competitive factor for successful establishment in the domestic and foreign markets, especially where there is an explicit request of buyers, small importers, and big retailers;
- sustainability is a competitive element to increase customer loyalty;
- the market responds positively—above all, the foreign markets that appreciate the quality of the product, the methods of the production (if certified), and the deep link between the product and the territory.

The thesis is confirmed that, for micro-enterprises, the offer of sustainable products represents an important competitive factor, given their greater incidence of foreign turnover. Furthermore, the research confirms the thesis of the scientific debate about the existence of a positive link between sustainable innovation and competitiveness [107–109], where the analyzed companies claim to have supported sustainability with innovative capabilities that, at the same time, have been guided by the standards and have allowed their adoption. Companies claim the role of sustainable innovation as an important driver of competitiveness and a factor of the differentiation of the offers that will be characterized in the market for environmental and/or social value.

On the other hand, two factors seem to be capable of undermining the further development of sustainable business models:

- (1) The economic “sustainability” of these models, that is, the ability of companies to sustain investments and costs, linked to sustainability, and the market’s willingness to

take responsibility for them. It has been said that the costs that companies must bear to obtain certifications are considered high by companies and, in the case of smaller companies, can represent an entry barrier; additionally, it has been emphasized that, very often, CSR practices increase consumer prices;

- (2) The observation that the sustainability of food products is a supply chain practice. In other words, there are relations of mutual influence between agricultural production, the production of food products on an industrial scale, wholesale and retail distribution activities, food preparation, and consumption. Therefore, to achieve a sustainable supply chain, it is necessary to align the processes of all the actors involved, very often rooted, based on different and inflexible technologies, as well as to consider the low levels of mutual trust between the actors.

However, prospects for the commitment to sustainability in the agri-food supply chains seem to be positive, as they are in line with the orientation of national and European institutions that always require more sustainability in quality products; they meet consumption trends and eating styles that increasingly recognize the existence of a close relationship between food and well-being and are comforted by market data showing consumers' growing preference for healthy and safe products (90%) and production methods that do not damage the environment (87%) [110,111].

In conclusion, if we accept the thesis that the "sustainable ingredient" can represent a further element reinforcing the quality of products from the agroindustry in Campania, strengthening the competitiveness of companies in foreign markets, it is also necessary to highlight the need for a policy that intervenes in supporting these processes, above all to allow smaller companies to not be excluded, as well as in stimulating participatory solutions among the players in the supply chain, so as to facilitate the system of information and the sharing of ideas and processes to redesign the functioning of agri-food supply chains with a view towards achieving sustainable development goals.

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