

## Article

# Tourist Walking Trails in Italy and Argentina: Navigating Political Recognition and Socio-Territorial Innovation

Mario Coscarello <sup>1,\*</sup>  and Gabriele Manella <sup>2,\*</sup> <sup>1</sup> Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Calabria, 87036 Rende, Italy<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology and Economic Law, University of Bologna, 40126 Bologna, Italy\* Correspondence: mario.coscarello@unical.it (M.C.); gabriele.manella@unibo.it (G.M.);  
Tel.: +39-340-580-8913 (M.C.); +39-328-341-4644 (G.M.)

**Abstract:** Tourism is often considered the world's biggest industry, as it contributes approximately 10% of the global GDP. Despite this economic impact, tourism also includes important critical issues like territorial inequalities, diminishment of local engagement, and has high environmental and cultural impacts. This study investigates the rise of "walking trail tourism", a niche sector where the respect for local communities and the environmental sustainability are particularly important. The focus is on Italy and Argentina: two countries with very different political, tourism, and biophysical backgrounds, but with the common recent development of walking trails and forms of social innovation. This study explores three main questions: the trends in walking trail tourism, the role of these trails in fostering local social innovation, and the influence of national policies in this domain. The study combines historical-statistical analysis, political-legislative review, and interviews with experts in order to assess all these aspects. Findings reveal significant social innovation trends within walking trail tourism but also challenges in territorial coordination and the establishment of national governance. Italy and Argentina are both characterized by an opposite situation regarding walking trails: there are several local initiatives but a lack of national guidelines in the former, and some good national policies but few bottom-up initiatives in the latter.

**Keywords:** sustainable tourism; governance multi-stakeholder; community participation; Europe; Latin America



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## 1. Introduction: Social Innovation and Tourism

### 1.1. The Increasing Importance of Walking Trails and Social Innovation in Tourism

The capacity of tourism in moving people and capitals is very well known and clearly shown by data. Over 1 billion international arrivals were registered in 2019 and at the end of 2023, after the COVID-19 fallout, it rose again to 975 million (93% of the 2019 data) [1]. In other words, tourism seems stronger than any economic, security, or pandemic crisis.

Walking trails are not recent, but one of the oldest forms of non-instrumental travel, dating back many centuries before the birth of modern tourism. If we consider pilgrimages in the Middle Ages, for example, they not only involved several social classes but contributed to attributing a "status" to pilgrims as well as to providing infrastructures to facilitate their travel and hospitality [2].

Over the centuries, attention to this sector has experienced fluctuating trends even if in some cases it has remained quite high, such as in the Camino de Santiago. In recent decades, however, we have seen a clear and rapid growth of importance also at an international level, similar to what happened for tourism in general. An important step forward came from the EU, which launched the cultural routes in 1987 [3]. These are routes involving (1) walking or cycling (even paddling), according to a (2) path that has a (3) historical, artistic or spiritual value. The slow mobility associated with the duration of several days, clearly configures these routes as prominent forms of experiential tourism, with a use of

spaces that captures the complexity of places in human and ecosystem dimensions [4]. A further important step came from UNESCO: in 2014, the Qhapaq Ñan (Inka Road system) was included in the World Heritage List, and in 2023 it happened also to the Zarafshan-Karakum Corridor for the Silk Roads [5]. This decision seems to be another indicator of the growing importance of these trails, where the religious and spiritual value is combined with cultural, landscape, and economic–commercial ones.

To understand the essence of walking trails, however, they must be distinguished from other practices. In trekking, for example, competitive aspects and tracks being in semi-wild areas are fundamental. On the contrary, walking trails can be seen as a decantation of collective memory [6], invention or revitalization of tourist travels [7], and a continuous exchange between cultures [8].

Economic meanings are important as well of course. Walking trails can be factors of development for small and medium-sized enterprises [9]. This is even clearer for marginal regions, in search of tools to tackle isolation and a lack of work opportunities and basic services [10,11].

If we turn our attention to social innovation, we can see that this concept is consolidated in economic and work sociology. Despite the relevance for tourism and local development as well, however, just a few studies on the link between these issues can be found [12]. In addition, if social innovation is a useful tool for local and regional studies, its role at the national level seems to be less clear.

Furthermore, from the references we found, theory on social innovation has been built mainly between Europe and the United States [13]. Studies in Latin America are relatively unknown, despite some interesting practices and approaches [14,15]. We would like to contribute to the scientific debate by trying to fill these gaps.

### *1.2. Research Aims and the Selection of Argentina and Italy*

This article aims to contribute to the international debate on the role of social innovation in the implementation of effective public policies on sustainable tourism, through a focus on walking trails. Two cases will be considered and compared (Argentina and Italy) with three research questions: which trends characterise walking trail tourism in these countries? In which ways are the trails representing a territorial opportunity for social innovation? What is the role of the national level and institutions in this process?

In the first part, an introduction to the concept and a debate on social innovation will be given as well as attention to the relation between local development and tourism. After that, a focus on walking trails will be given with some statistical, political and legislative elements about this sector in Italy and Argentina. In the following parts, a presentation of the research tools (14 semi-structured interviews with experts and key informants) will be provided, together with the most important results and a comparative discussion.

Argentina and Italy were chosen, first of all, for their differences, which, in the authors' opinion, makes comparative analysis more interesting. Their size as well as their political, economic, and biophysical contexts are clearly different. As regards their history with tourism development, the Italian one is certainly much longer: it could include the Grand Tour of the young nobles of the eighteenth century, but it certainly includes from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, with the birth of the first seaside resorts and the first mountain destinations, as well as the growing attention to some of its art cities [16]. The history of Argentinian tourism, on the other hand, is much shorter: very limited, and almost entirely domestic until the 1990s, it has seen growing governmental and entrepreneurial attention since the early 2000s. Such attention has led this country to be third in Latin America for international arrivals after Mexico and the Dominican Republic [17].

In addition to these differences, however, there are some interesting common aspects. These countries seem to share the recent development of walking trails, related in both cases to the intention of enhancing their landscape and natural heritage. At the same time, Italy and Argentina have been of particular interest for the emergence of forms and incubators of social innovation. This is shown also through the Essentials project, within

which this study has been carried out [18]. These cases therefore constitute a potentially interesting combination of differences and similarities. In addition, they constitute the opportunity for the authors to go ahead into areas already investigated in previous studies.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Social Innovation: Some Definitions for a Growing Debate

The topic of social innovation has become increasingly important in the academic and policy debate [19–26]. Social innovation can be considered an umbrella term to include all the initiatives about the “creation and implementation of new solutions to social problems”, the benefits of which are also shared beyond innovators [27] (p. 51). Several disciplines and topics converge on this term [28–31]. Management has been one of the first to use it, with an approach aimed at facilitating the replicability of processes and practices by providing policy makers with precise tools [32]. Murray, Caulier-Grice, and Mulgan [33], for example, identified six steps of an innovation process with which to guide cues and ideas for an outcome with a high social impact (prompts, inspirations, and diagnoses; proposals and ideas; prototyping and pilots; sustaining; scaling and diffusion and systemic change).

Obviously, in line with the most recent models of innovation, these steps may be non-sequential, but also include moments of cross and circular feedback. However, knowing these steps is important in order to have a frame through which to reflect on the types of support and necessary partners to ensure scaling and sustainability.

Several socio-economic issues contribute to the recent importance of social innovation: some of these are the systemic economic crisis, high youth unemployment rates [23], and environmental issues [34]. Social innovation is seen more and more as a tool to deal with these challenges [35], and “the ambition of social innovation policies thus becomes that of enabling society to act” [21] (p. 7). At the same time, it is a more and more prominent element to enhance local development processes against the weakening of the state/nation [36] as well as the social conflicts around the continuum between global and local and between mobility and immobility [37,38].

### 2.2. Social Innovation and Public Local Policy

Moulaert and Nussbaumer [39] identify three dimensions of social innovation: (a) the fulfilment of human needs that have not yet been satisfied, because they are not yet or no longer perceived as important by the market or the state; (b) through a change in social relations, with particular reference to participatory governance; (c) with the added value of an increase in socio-political capacities (empowerment).

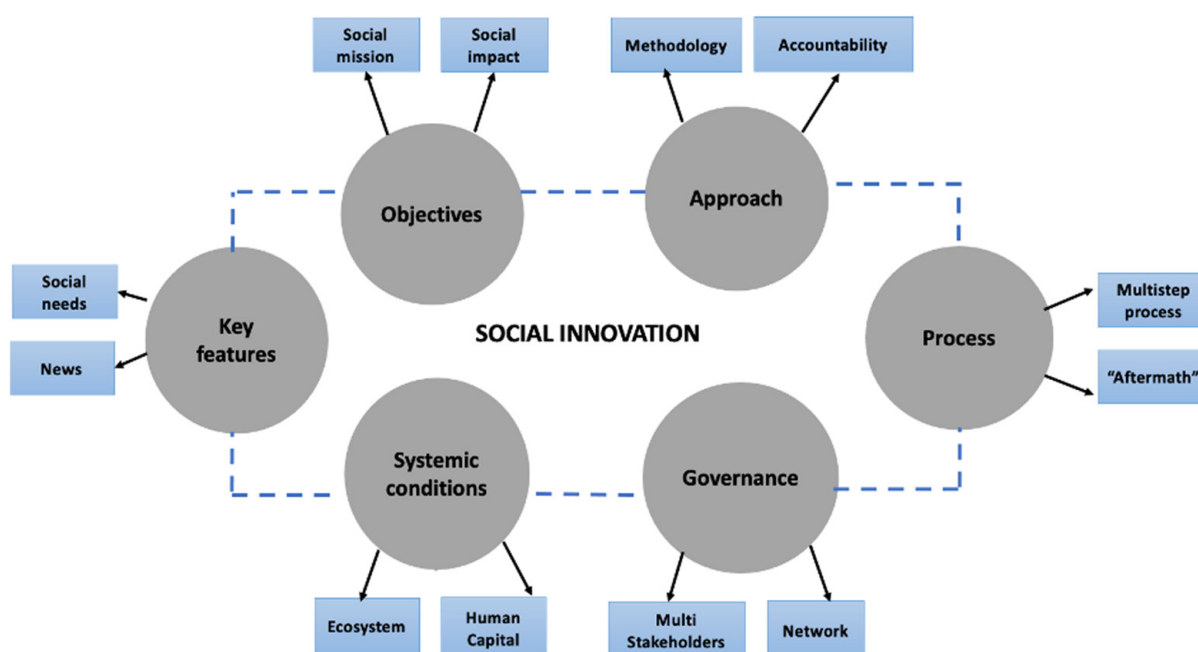
It is also important to remember that social innovation can come from civil society initiatives (individuals, groups or organisations), economic actors (both more traditional and with regard to social economy), and public actors (the state or public administration). In the first case we speak of bottom-up social innovation, in the third case of top-down social innovation, while in the second case it can be of both types. Sometimes, moreover, these processes can take hybrid forms, as in the case of the bottom-linked type [40].

Regarding the importance of the local dimension in these processes, public decision-makers have implemented several multilevel actions (urban neighbourhoods, cities, regions, etc.), trying to satisfy the residents’ needs, to regenerate a sense of identity and community, and to promote innovative entrepreneurship [41,42]. On the other side, local public policies are increasingly considered an “ideal” dimension to experiment new economic models [40,43]. This local attention can also be seen through the development of urban studies. As Bernardi points out [32], this is one of the main references for social innovation theory [44], and he has highlighted the impact of space on social processes [45]. In particular, Moulaert and Nussbaumer [39] stress the role of local actors and social and cultural activities in transforming initiatives into collective actions [32,46].

The focus on these initiatives is also recognised in rural areas, especially in Latin America. Rey de Marulanda and Tancredi [47] considered about 4800 social innovation experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean. Other, more recent studies [48] document

examples of social innovation in various rural regions of Latin America. These practices are considered essential to overcome challenges such as isolation, an ageing population, lack of opportunities for young people, and the political irrelevance of these areas [49,50]. Social innovation, therefore, not only responds to unmet social needs but also creates new resources, such as solidarity networks and community practices that strengthen the social fabric. Research carried out in Albania, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Turkey, and Balkan-area countries [51] also highlights how social innovation in rural areas is closely linked to the creation of social value through the activation of local resources, the promotion of community cohesion and the increase of connection with external actors, offering a sustainable development model that combines tradition and innovation.

If we consider the relationship between social innovation and public policies, the model proposed by Montanari, Rodighiero, Sgaragli, and Teloni [52] is relevant. After an extensive literature review through which 91 definitions were found, the authors extrapolated twelve basic elements and six building blocks for social innovation: key features, objectives, approach, process, governance, and systemic conditions (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The dimensions of social innovation for public policy implementation. Source: Authors' elaboration on [52].

The first building block refers to key features. In this sense, a first attribute of social innovation concerns its focus on finding answers to a variety of social needs (through the mobilisation of target communities and the activation of social entrepreneurship initiatives). A second one is the novelty, which may concern both the outputs and the relations that emerge from the implemented processes.

A second building block concerns the objectives of social innovation. Specifically, a first dimension is the centrality of the social mission. A second one is the ability to have a high social impact (and sustainable as well, hence the need for monitoring and evaluation).

The third building block concerns the approach adopted. A first dimension is the development of methods to support dynamics that are open, multidisciplinary, and cross-fertilised with different skills and experiences and aimed at changing the traditional forms of governance. The second dimension relates to accountability, which involves transparency and traceability obligations.

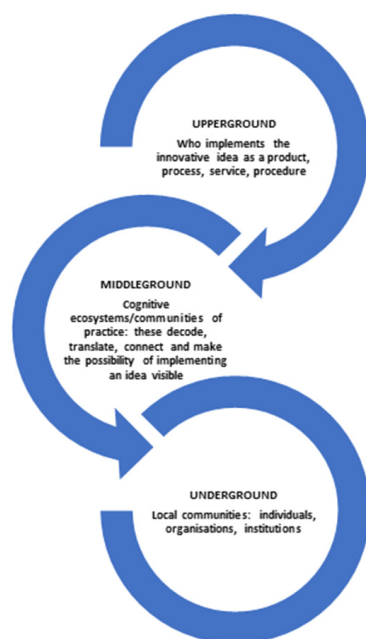
The fourth building block refers to the processual nature of social innovation. As illustrated by Murray et al. [33], it is a multi-step process, and it requires attention to understand what happens after an output is achieved (aftermath).

The fifth building block refers to the actors involved in the governance: citizens, organisations, research and academia, the business world and public administration. The initial support, however, comes from networks of actors (both formal and informal, both local and national/international) in particular. For all these reasons, governance systems in social innovation can only have a multi-stakeholder approach.

The sixth building block refers to the systemic conditions (economic, social, and legal) that facilitate social innovation. In other words, the ecosystem of resources (hard and soft infrastructures, funding mechanisms, etc.).

This articulated model, however, seems to miss some useful aspects about the relationship between social innovation and tourism. For example, if we look at the systemic conditions, the biophysical component is not mentioned. It is definitely fundamental in the case of tourist walking trails as well as, more generally, for measuring and monitoring these regions. Implicitly, the growth of attention to this component has a positive cascading effect on trails, which find their essential basis precisely in the landscape and in the protection of material and immaterial heritage. On the other hand, our contribution is focused on the socio-political aspects, and we have preferred not to tackle a component that is outside our expertise.

As Battaglini points out [20] (p. 71), for a local social innovation process, a favourable institutional context is evidently needed, supporting the actors involved (promoters, implementers, gatekeepers), and in general the stakeholders, in co-constructing and implementing. The positive result is therefore the combination of interactions between actors and the intermediate level community (*middleground*) that allows the idea formulation phase (*underground*) to be combined with its implementation phase (*upperground*) (Figure 2). In this perspective, therefore, the middleground is decisive and is generally realised by organisations or communities of practice that are able to recognise the validity of the idea, decode the knowledge and information content and translate it into a project usable by larger groups [20,53]. This also requires that policies consider the specificities of the local region and its inhabitants, and that they be co-designed with them through a bottom-linked process [54].



**Figure 2.** Underground, Middleground and Upperground of Social Innovation. Source: authors' elaboration on [20].

### 2.3. Social Innovation in Tourism: The Potential in the Walking Trails

Sociological studies on tourism have focused heavily on its current characteristics and the many aspects in which this sector is considered emblematic of society and the post-modern condition. Minca and Oakes [55] (p. 295) present three main reasons. “Tourism embodied all the contradictions and paradoxes produced by modernity itself. . . . Second, we noted the growing lack of distinctions between tourism and practices of everyday life in so-called postmodern societies. . . . Third, the tourism lens allowed us to think about postmodern subjectivity in productive ways, as formed through an ongoing tension (or, as we put it at the time, paradox), between the powers of control and freedom, cognitive rationality and aesthetic reflexivity, and so on”.

The “mass tourism” phase, which took hold between the 1950s and 1970s, saw a prevalence of the interpretation of tourist behaviour as a search for or confirmation of social belonging, with very limited importance given to aspects such as sustainability or responsibility for the natural and cultural heritage of the regions visited. In contrast, since the 1980s, holiday behaviour and attitudes have increasingly been interpreted as an expression of one’s own distinctiveness and individuality, also in reaction of a society that provides fewer and fewer references and sees the weakening of all agencies of social control [2]. If, therefore, the first sociological conceptualisation of the tourist labelled them as a “travelling idiot” [56], as a passive consumer of services tailor-made for them, more recently the figure of the tourist is often seen as an active participant, and much more attentive to issues of sustainability and social responsibility [57]. This change is also full of consequences for destinations. Without asserting that the phase of mass tourism is over, there is a widespread tendency that any space can be transformed from a geographical place to a tourist location [58], and each destination can correspond to multiple types of land use and interaction with the socio-cultural and environmental context [59]. Consequently, “it is no longer only the place of the holiday that is decisive, but—and above all—the activities that can take place in that particular location” [60] (p. 77). Today’s tourism therefore “needs promotional interventions, a diversification of offers, an adjustment of quality levels, similar to what is happening in emerging tourist countries” [61] (p. 30).

Tourism—if it aims to respect local heritage, create benefits for the host community, and qualitatively improve the tourism experience—is therefore increasingly a phenomenon compatible with social innovation initiatives [62] (p. 123). This seems even more valid for responsible tourism [63], whose key objectives include: “(1) Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity; (2) Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance; (3) Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation”. In this perspective, moreover, an emerging strand of literature, particularly in Latin America, should be mentioned: that of “community tourism”. Starting from what has already been theorised by Maldonado [64], it is understood as “the set of tourism activities that, through the sector’s own dynamics, generate processes of social inclusion and integration of local communities and operators, favouring the participation and decision-making of these actors in the management of destinations and activities” [65] (p. 18). Community practices can therefore contribute to promoting the development of tourism that respects the environment, common goods, and cultural heritage in an innovative way.

While these trends and reflections point to the relevance of tourism and social innovation at the local level, few studies to date have addressed the relationship between these two aspects [12]. One area in which to explore the possible relevance is undoubtedly that of walking trails (a term that is not easy to translate, but is described in Italian as *cammini* and in Spanish as *senderos*). While this form of pilgrimage has also attracted the attention of

sociology in recent years [66,67], the consistency of the debate about the sector in general seems less clear. However, we note the study by Godtman King et al. [68], which analysed 195 research articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals, focusing on tourist trails in non-urban settings. The results show that the research was mainly conducted in Western and English-speaking countries, and that the most studied activity is hiking. However, there is an increase in studies examining activities such as mountain biking and trail-running.

In any case, this sector shows a “natural vocation” for sustainability and responsibility, since it makes its relationship with the surrounding landscape and with the tangible and intangible heritage of an area an indispensable element. The promotion of the trails can therefore become a priority from a local perspective [69], and even more so for those marginal areas [4] whose isolation from the centres can become “distinctive features” that make possible unprecedented processes of promoting the natural and cultural resources present [70]. Trail walking tourism in these areas can therefore be linked to the recovery of artistic heritage and buildings that have fallen into disuse due to depopulation, the recovery of old traditions and economic value chains, and the promotion of the natural landscape [71].

#### *2.4. Tourism and Walking Trails: Statistical Difficulties and Legislative–Institutional Uncertainties*

Finding data on walking trails on a national level is extremely difficult. At the same time, the institutional recognition of this sector is not always clear and consolidated.

Starting from a country with a strong tourist tradition like Italy, the only real attempt to systematically measure the phenomenon is the report *Italia, Paese di Cammini* [72], which each year contacts the managers of the trails themselves (113 responses in 2023) and administers an online questionnaire to walkers (2427 responses). The report shows both a growth in the number of credentials provided by the trails (101,419 in 2023, an increase of 25% compared to 2022) and even more of participants (57,600 in 2023, an increase of 76% compared to 2022). Despite the uncertainties, therefore, the number of routes and walkers appears to be clearly growing. Is this trend matched by an increase in political and legislative recognition? The information gathered on this gives ambivalent results. First of all, the tourism sector itself has not always had a clear recognition at the national level. The first Ministry of Tourism in Italy was established by Italian Law 617/1959 but then went through decades of suppression, reactivation, and mergers with other areas, leading up to the current Ministry of Tourism (MiTur) in the current government [73]. It should also be emphasised that the constitutional reform of Title V of the Constitution (Italian Constitutional Law no. 3/2001) has made tourism a matter of “residual” competence for all regions. In spite of this, there remains “the planning, coordination and promotion of national tourism policies, relations with the regions and projects for the development of the tourism sector, relations with the European Union and international tourism, and relations with trade associations and tourism enterprises and consumer associations” (Art. 6, Italian Decree-Law 22/2021). With regard to the walking trails sector, on 7 February 2024 the 7th Senate Commission approved the text of Bill no. 562 containing the “Provisions for the promotion and development of Italian Walking Trails” after a debate that began in October 2021 [74]. The Bill contains nine articles concerning the structuring of a form of governance for Walking Trails, understood as “itineraries of European, national or regional importance, which can be travelled on foot or by other forms of gentle and sustainable mobility, without the aid of motor vehicles, divided into daily stages, and which represent a way of enjoying the widespread natural and cultural heritage, of promoting the cultural, historical, artistic, religious, linguistic, landscape, food and wine and sporting attractions, as well as the development of tourism in the regions concerned”. The law aims not only to ensure standards of safety, hospitality, and accessibility, but also to define a governance structure (the steering committee and the permanent committee) that can provide guidance and coordination at the national level. Associations operating in the sector will be represented on the permanent committee, initiating shared planning and

coordination of activities, facilitating the emergence of collaboration networks and the exchange of good practices. However, this ambitious bill has not been debated by the Chamber of Deputies for months and is therefore not yet approved. On the other hand, in spite of a diffusion and a structuring of walking trails that seems to be decidedly advanced, in Italy there are no examples of nationally promoted itineraries but rather a series of locally or at most regionally managed trails.

As far as the Argentinian case is concerned, there does not seem to be very up-to-date data. However, in recent years there has been a strong interest in the issues of promoting sustainable development practices, particularly promoted by the Ministry of Tourism and Sport. A useful guidebook [75] has been drawn up in this sense, resulting from a specific study on the walking trails (*senderos*) at a national level. The particularity of the guidebook is that for the first time it has precisely indicated the location, technical specifications (degree of difficulty, length, duration) and logistics for reaching the 42 walking trails in Argentina.

After a period of little attention to these issues, probably linked to the change of government, a growing relevance of the sector has emerged through the launch of some ambitious policies such as Ruta Natural [76], promoted since 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic by the Ministry of Tourism and Sport. This project, also launched after a national survey, aims to promote all the *senderos* experiences (some 90 of them, thus more than doubling in a decade since the previous guide was published) by providing a precise explanation and location. In fact, a specific section of the site provides a general overview, allowing those interested to view the trails in each Argentine province.

At the same time, the Ministry of Tourism once again produced a “Catalogue of Co-operative, Mutual and Community-Based Tourism” [77]. This way, the main experiences related to the promotion of community tourism experiences were mapped and made available, i.e., practices promoted by local and indigenous communities, which experiment with participatory forms of tourism. This mapping is linked to the experiences of community tourism [64], i.e., a network of over 70 farming and indigenous community experiences that identify themselves in the Red Argentina de Turismo Rural Comunitario (RATURC) national network. This network was created in 2009 as part of a public policy project promoted by the Ministry of Tourism in collaboration with the Secretariat of Family Agriculture (SAF) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries. In some cases, the relationships created with university extension experiences are relevant [78], particularly from the perspective of creating empowerment for the communities involved. The role of lecturers and researchers involved in sustainable tourism projects in close collaboration with local stakeholders is relevant in this direction. From the results of other research, the role of university extension, and thus of incubators [78], in promoting environmentally and culturally friendly forms of tourism appears significant [79].

The particularity of the creation of innovative promotion policies at the national level through specific programmes, the liveliness of local experiences of community tourism, and the role of university extensions for the promotion of tourism experiences therefore make the Argentine case particularly interesting, all the more so given the scarcity of literature on walking trails in this country and, more generally, in Latin America.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The research we carried out mainly involved qualitative social research methods and techniques, naturally devoting special attention to specific studies on these topics [80–85]. As mentioned in the introduction, there were three research questions that guided the study, the first being more descriptive and the other two with a more explanatory slant:

What are the trends in the walking trail segment in the two countries?

In what way do walking trails represent an example of social innovation in the regions?

Is there a role for the national level in this process?

In order to answer the first question, we first resorted to a literature search for any statistical data that would allow us to put the phenomenon into context. To answer the third question, on the other hand, an in-depth institutional–legislative study was first carried out

to reconstruct the national framework in the tourism sector in general and in the segment of walking trails in particular. Both these aspects were already touched upon in Section 2.4. In order to answer the second question, but also to have more information on the first and third, 14 semi-structured interviews (7 in Italy and 7 in Argentina) were held with experts and primary witnesses. Ten interviews were conducted online and four in-person.

The research period, which ran from May 2023 to June 2024, was therefore characterised as much by desk work as by contact with interviewees, whom we sought out according to four categories, which we considered to be of particular interest to the question:

- Three institutional contacts at the national level (IN).
- Two institutional contacts at the regional or local level (IR).
- Five trade association representatives in the walking trail sector (AC).
- Four experts from the tourism sector with particular experience in the field of walking trails (ET).

In the fieldwork part, we set out to find some key informants to give a national view and to explain the relationship between this and the local level. To achieve this objective, we did not consider it necessary to conduct a large number of interviews, as is also suggested by some methodological literature on qualitative research [86]. In any case, we think that the expertise of the interviewees provided a clear picture and appropriate answers to our research questions, thanks also to the length of the interviews (from 50 min to 120 min). Furthermore, this moved from our previous studies on these topics [82–85] who helped us to identify the following selection criteria for contact persons: (i) several years' experience in the field of tourist routes; (ii) expertise and knowledge of forms and processes of social innovation; (iii) specific expertise on the relationship between policies at national and at regional/local level; (iv) understanding the point of view of practitioners and the contact persons of national and regional associations; (v) their selection ensuring a gender balance (the interviewees were 7 men and 7 women).

With regard to the interview script, we opted for a few questions while at the same time leaving a certain degree of freedom for the interviewee to express themselves based on their own experience and opinions. The semi-structured interview outline included an initial part with an introduction about the interviewee's expertise in walking trails (with attention to their privacy and anonymity of course). The five sections of the interview outline, on the other hand, were: (1) recent trends in walking trails (increases, decreases, national distribution, etc.); (2) recent trends in walkers (gender, age, education, nationality, etc.); (3) walking as opportunity for social innovation (relations with schools, relations between walkers and the local community, etc.); (4) walking as an opportunity for marginal regions (national policies on this matter, good or bad practices, etc.); (5) networking around walking trails (national networks, forms of national public–private collaboration, etc.). However, the common thread was, on the one hand, to answer the three research questions mentioned above, and on the other hand, to investigate elements of innovation that can be traced back to the six dimensions shown in Figure 1. In order to facilitate dialogue with the interviewees, however, prompts were included in the script for the interviewer to help focus or return to the points considered most consistent with the objectives of the study. The interview script had a first section with a more "exploratory" objective, trying to gather impressions of the consistency and recent changes in the trails. While it is true that a lot of data had already been found during the desk analysis, it is still a particularly difficult area to measure, making the point of view from insiders or experts of particular interest. A second section of the script aimed to get into the more explanatory part of the research, touching on the relationship between the walking trail sector and forms of social innovation on the one hand and with the local region on the other, naturally with a focus on the synergies between these aspects and the possible role of national organisations. The last section of the interview then underscored the aspect of governance and networking of the trails themselves, touching on the possible importance of the national level but also on the possible synergy between the public and private sectors.

In both countries, specific national routes have been identified. In Argentina, the La Ruta Natural website contains information and materials that allow tourists to learn about all the regional *senderos* (Figure 3). In Italy, a ministerial project promoted the creation of an atlas of all the available walking trails (Figure 4).

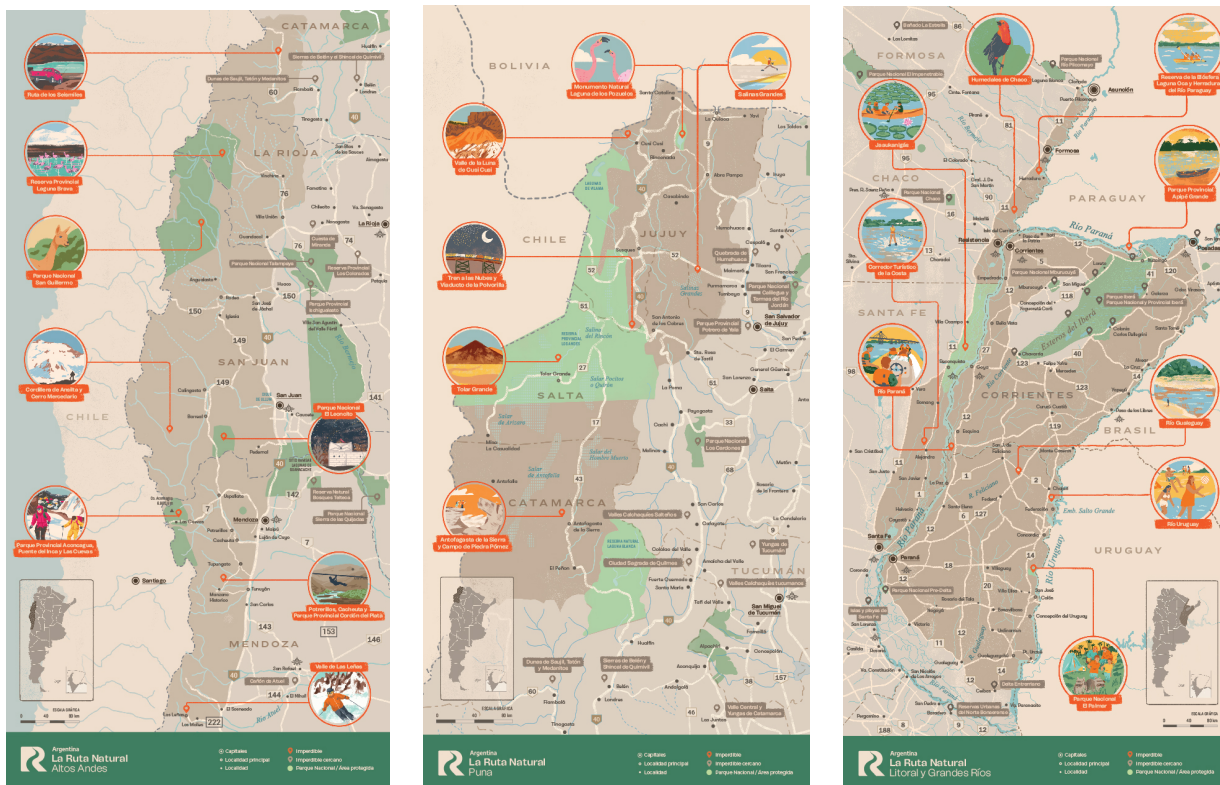


Figure 3. Some Argentinian regional maps of walking trails. Source: <https://www.larutanatural.gov.ar/es/mapas-y-otras-descargas> (accessed on 30 July 2024).

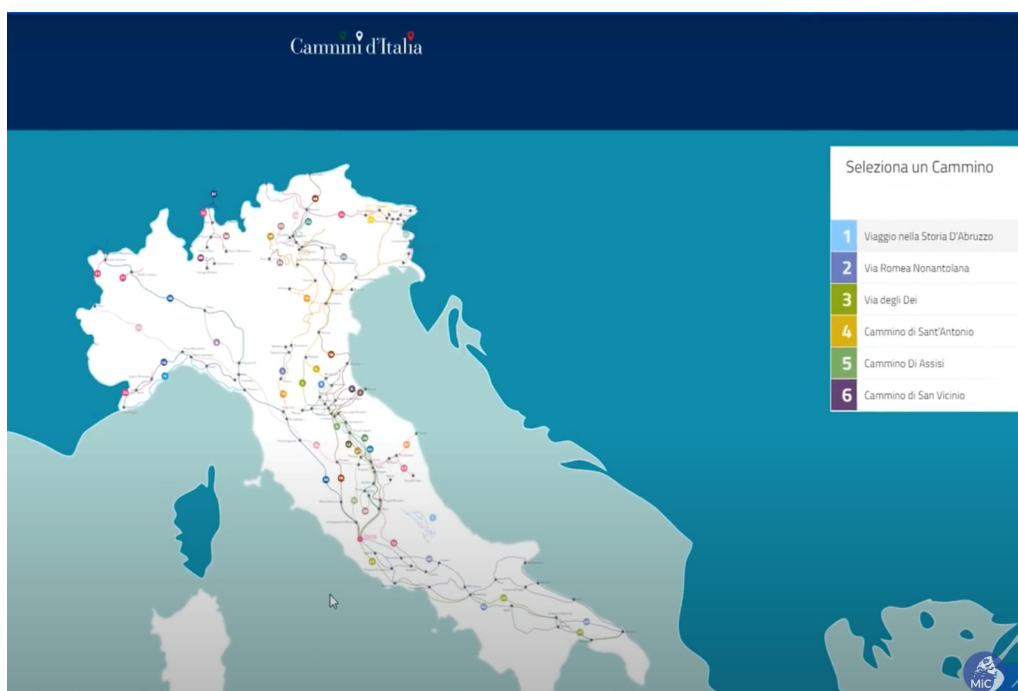


Figure 4. A map of the walking trails in Italy. Source: Picture from a video posted on the website <https://camminiditalia.org/cammini-italia/> (accessed on 30 July 2024).

## 4. Results

In this section we will focus on the results of the interviews, which, as mentioned in the previous section, aimed to answer all three of the research questions underlying the work. In reporting the salient results, we will divide them into topical areas and highlight the elements of theoretical debate that emerged, in particular concerning the building blocks of Figure 1 and the middleground of Figure 2.

### 4.1. Walking Trail Trends in Recent Years

Interviews conducted in Argentina show that there have been attempts at the national level but that these have been greatly affected by changes of government, to the point that what was carried out by one administration was all but dismantled by the next. While the very important experience of the Ruta Natural certainly remains, others have already ended; but, it seems that with respect to numbers, there has been a growth of other trails. It seems to us that the social needs and news regarding the first building block (Key Features) can be found in the answers of the interviewees, specifically when they speak of the clear perception of a growth in Argentinian tourism in general and that of the walking trail segment in particular. Indeed, the growth was confirmed by the desk work, from which emerged the recent and important work carried out by the government to promote the network of Argentine trails [76].

As far as I know, there have been a few attempts to create walking trails, particularly here in the Buenos Aires area. . . mostly these trails were linked to food and wine itineraries [ . . . ] In my opinion, this is a growing trend, but there is the national experience launched by the Ministry, “La Ruta Natural”, which is a good project for the promotion of tourism and also of walking trails. (Interview ET1\_Arg)

In Italy, the interviews confirm a growth that started with the 2000 Jubilee but has mostly taken form in the last ten years, with the real boom being even more recent. This boom is also evident in the numbers: 130 recognised trails, of which 62 are included in the Ministry of Tourism’s catalogue of religious trails [87]. Even more interesting is the fact that the pandemic, which for much of the sector resulted in a collapse, had much less of an impact on walking trails, and in some cases even favoured their growth (see the case of the Via degli Dei, the 130 km trail from Florence to Bologna). Despite this, there is still a certain improvisation among both those who create the trails and perhaps those who walk them.

The walking trails have enjoyed great success recently. Of particular note was the boom of summer 2021, when people were still travelling abroad because of the pandemic, thus greatly benefiting the trails, the Via degli Dei being at “full capacity” for example. (Interview ET1\_It)

### 4.2. Walkers’ Trends in Recent Years

The interviews conducted in Argentina reveal a great difficulty in obtaining estimates on the phenomenon. None of the interviewees were aware of reliable data. There is also the impression that the problem does not only concern the walking sector but the whole of tourism, confirming the initial idea of a country with promising potential but still in its infancy in many respects.

I don’t think there is any official data, or at least I don’t know of any other than the ministry website, but as we have seen there is no such data. (Interview ET2\_Arg)

However, the problem of estimates also exists in Italy, which certainly has a much more established tourism infrastructure. For example, the registration of credentials has inevitable limitations given that not all walkers request them and they are more common for religious itineraries and less so for others. So, while making estimates of the walking trails remains difficult, the common feeling is that the situation is improving. The perception that emerges from the data in Terre di Mezzo’s annual report was confirmed by those interviewed, with the number of walkers growing rapidly and with increasingly cross-

cutting characteristics: a phenomenon involving all genders and generations and no longer just for the wealthy elderly and people with purely spiritual motivations. However, some interviewees also emphasised the growing interest of walkers in “short” trails as opposed to longer ones: possibly ring-shaped, or at least doable in a week at most. The issue of costs emerged indirectly: there is a widespread impression that the walker tends to spend less than other types of tourists, and that this characteristic may be accentuated given the recent growth of young people who tend to be more budget conscious.

Today the big push is for the 5- to 7-day walks with certain logistical features (easy access by transport, etc.). However, the issue of the number of beds remains, and even more so of beds at an affordable cost. (Interview ET3\_It)

In my opinion, shorter walks (up to 15 days), and circular walks (i.e., with a loop route) [...] This confirms a trend already present in past years: women are very active in walking on their own, the average age is rather high (around 50), the emergence of particular phenomena such as the Via degli Dei (also chosen by many young people, perhaps because it links two important university towns). (Interview ET1\_It)

Among the growing motivations, I would say walking as something “challenging” is an experience in itself. Then also a way to get to know the area, so walking as an experiential opportunity. Or even for faith, there are still some of those. (Interview AC1\_It)

#### 4.3. *Walking as an Opportunity for Social Innovation*

A first aspect related to social innovation experiences concerns community-based rural tourism. In fact, this includes a broad, innovative range of experiences involving creative organisational strategies with the aim of utilising and re-appropriating the local regions and living spaces of communities [88]. These practices focus on the active role of local communities that provide tourism opportunities and safeguard local values and regions. In this sense, the RATURC Network connects all experiences and attempts to establish cooperation with institutions. Moreover, collaboration with university programmes that foster these initiatives seems important [78].

According to those interviewed, attempts have been made to strengthen the walking trail sector and work with schools, but they cannot say whether this is an increasing or consolidating trend. In any case, they agree with the importance of investing in training and human capital to support social innovation, as also highlighted by Battaglini [20].

Certainly as an incubation project we believe that this form of tourism is necessary to inculcate a cultural change [...] We work with our students, we have a degree programme in hostelry, students are very interested in these subjects. I don't know if there have been specific programmes as public policy on this aspect. (Interview ET2\_Arg)

From a national point of view, the experiences initiated by the Ministry of Tourism are an important point. In fact, a guidebook designed as a sustainable tourism development project has been available since 2015. This collected more than 40 trails in all Argentine provinces. However, one perception that clearly emerges is that of “starting over” every time the government changes, there being a complete “reset” of what has gone before. This communication project, which was intended to contribute to regional development and integration processes, was therefore not followed up on. The lack of political continuity, and thus of a favourable institutional environment, is also a significant barrier to social innovation, as pointed out by Moulaert and Nussbaumer [39].

After the 2010 to 2015 programme with Macri everything was cancelled. No special attention was given to environmental education. (Interview. In1\_Arg)

With regard to the Italian case, interesting activities emerge with respect to schools, but with the clear impression that they are isolated, destined to die out, or in any case not to be replicated elsewhere. Similar considerations apply to networking and the cultivation of the relationship between walkers and the local region: some good practices but nothing systematic. It must also be said, moreover, that many of the experiences cited as virtuous and innovative are abroad: first and foremost, those linked to the Camino de Santiago, but also in the case of France for the relationship it has been able to create between walking trails and local schools.

There was a network that had worked to strengthen ties with schools, but unfortunately it did not move forward. Some experiences saw progress, but very small ones. In France there is a much more deeply rooted culture in this area: for example, many schools send their students on a two-week walk to experience the Grand Randonnée trails. (Interview ET1\_It)

Regarding networks between walkers and local actors, yes and no. It depends: if there's a solid association behind it, yes. Sometimes maybe it's easier with guides. But in my experience sometimes a bond was formed and sometimes not. (Interview AC2\_It)

Trails cannot be founded on politics, because if you connect them to the initiative of a mayor and an administration those who come after will invest in something else thinking that a different solution is better, even if only to distance themselves. That's why it is important to invest in training. (Interview AC1\_It)

This once again underlines the importance of the middleground of social innovation, where communities involved play a crucial role in linking the idea to its implementation, as described by Cohendet, Grandadam, and Simon [53].

The interviews thus reveal significant differences between Argentina and Italy regarding the governance of social innovation initiatives in tourism. In Argentina, the lack of continuity in public policies and the top-down nature of initiatives emerge as major challenges, as local involvement is often lacking. In Italy, however, the opposite situation is evident: a fragmentation of initiatives and the need for more coordinated governance and clearer guidelines.

#### *4.4. Walking Trails as an Opportunity for Marginal Regions*

A few activities at the institutional level (national or regional) have also emerged on this issue in Argentina, but according to the interviewees there are not many of them. While interesting, they are noted to have been somewhat top-down, without the involvement of the local regions that is crucial for their success and even more so for their sustainability over time. However, "community tourism" and "cooperative tourism", mentioned by the interviewees, emerge as innovative and growing formulas in this country, particularly for the protection of inland natural areas and indigenous communities.

The three programmes I talked about (Huella Andina, Senderos Argentinos, and Ruta Natural) have always had at their core the idea of involving the whole country, and in particular the more natural and inland areas. But, in my opinion, there is a fundamental problem, which is that these programmes have always been something conceived from above. . . . The provinces should have been more active, they should have followed the projects more to get them to the local regions, to the tour operators. . . . There are various experiences that have come together in the "Red Argentina de Turismo Rural Comunitario (RATuRC)". It is an experience promoted by the ministry to support local communities, their self-management and self-determination for tourism proposals. In particular, for indigenous communities. . . . We recently collaborated with the Ministry on this initiative in the II Encuentro de Turismo Cooperativo Mutual y de Base Comunitaria. (Interview IN1\_Arg)

Among our recent projects, we have continued to work on making our regions known and the experiences of sustainable tourism visible. As the Ministry of Tourism and Sport, we have created an interactive map, namely the Catalogue of Cooperative, Mutual and Community-Based Tourism. We believe it is very important to promote local experiences [77]. (Interview IN1\_Arg)

The experience of the community tourism network has become significant. For example, with the Pueblos Que Latán project we managed to bring together 33 local experiences, each with its own particular traits. A unified project was presented to the province of Buenos Aires. Other small towns in rural areas are joining because there's a lot of interest in working to strengthen local communities, and not only the indigenous ones. (Interview.IR2\_Arg)

With regard to the Italian context, it is agreed that a trail that works must start from the bottom and make use of public–private collaboration. There is also agreement on the proliferation of walking trails as a fact, and apparently as a victory for marginal communities because many such routes were introduced in those very areas. However, it should be noted that according to some interviewees, this is not necessarily a good thing. It can in fact create not only synergy but also a lot of dispersion and “anarchy”, i.e., a situation in which each trail does what it wants (including trail markings). Having fewer trails would perhaps help with the national coordination that many hope for and which is currently still lacking despite some recent attempts (see also Section 2.4). This reflects the concept of “territorialisation” of social innovation, where initiatives must be contextualised and supported locally to be successful.

It is not necessarily the case that this proliferation of walking trails is always positive. At a strategic level it is impossible to seriously promote and structure walking trails in all regions. And then we don't have 450,000 walkers a year in Santiago! [...] As Machado said: “Without a walker there is no trail”. We should build on what exists and already works, and develop others on these cornerstones. (Interview. ET3\_It)

The open secret of these trails is sharing: those who walk want to share their experience, to understand and see, taste and smell, and hear about it [...] The trail is not only made of beauty but of people who experience it and who know how to talk about it. (Interview ET2\_It)

It would be one of the reasons to structure a walking trail: to divert the itinerary from a city to an inland area that is beautiful but where you would otherwise not go. The biggest supporters of walking trails are the small villages crossed by the route. Their businesses see the difference and many would close without them. (Interview AC1\_It)

#### 4.5. Networking the Walking Trails

Regarding the Argentine experience, the Ruta Natural is a far-reaching initiative among the national policies. The attempt to unify all existing possibilities in the country through the portal of the Ministry's website seems important. The problem of the continuity of policies in this area, which all too often end with the mandate of the governments that promoted them, has also re-emerged. Also returning, however, is the idea of community tourism as a segment that more and more entities are trying to invest in, including as innovation incubators. These experiences seem to act as a middleground, i.e., a subject capable of creating interactions between the actors and the intermediate-level community to unite the underground of the formulation of the idea with the upperground of its implementation [20].

I am currently not aware of any national policies in this area, and I believe that the only initiative of this kind is Ruta Natural. Argentina is a very big country and full of tourism resources [...] We're trying with private individuals, with the incubator we're planning activities with some small hotels, as part of the community tourism network. These activities can be useful and are a good example of how a public university can operate locally, particularly in the more inland areas, far from the big cities where many tourists go [...] Here, as far as public policies are concerned, there's a big problem related to continuity. It has always been this way, every new government resets what the previous government did regardless. (Interview.ET1\_Arg)

As for the interviews in Italy, we saw some recurring themes. First of all, the issue of "everyone does it their own way". The national policy/regulatory level is lacking and national networks struggle to work together. However, the importance of word of mouth and associations in keeping the trails alive remains, as they must first and foremost be for the inhabitants and the local community. However, there is a basic problem of responsibilities, as we have also seen in Section 2.4: the responsibility for tourism is regional and not national. Attempts to secure a national framework have not yet been successful. A further complication is that there is now a Ministry of Tourism and a Ministry of Culture, and walking trails often fall somewhere between these two sectors.

Basically, all attempts have gone nowhere, either because the area cannot be regulated or because it is very much delegated to the regions [...] 130 major trails surveyed by Terre di Mezzo in Italy...and 130 different trail markings! [...] The promotion of the trail is mainly done free of charge, by word of mouth, advertising or TV or radio don't reach the target. The walkers know each other and recognise each other [...] But if there are trails in Italy it's thanks to the associations (track, walk, mark, etc.) that are still very much linked to their local communities. However, there is some attempt at national coordination. For example, some Trail Networks have sprung up [...] but they remain more like formal associations, which struggle to propose joint initiatives. (Interview.ET2\_It)

I think the world of walking trails is full of "egocentrics": 90% are the product of one person or a small group of people who sometimes trademark or otherwise have a personal interest (financial or ego) in maintaining control over the process, and this does not help much. They are often enthusiasts but not professionals. I have a lot of friends who are trail builders, but if we want to make progress we need to structure the public-private relationship more. (Interview ET3\_It)

In Italy there is no impediment to building a trail if certain parameters are not taken into account: it's a more "anarchic" situation than in France or Spain! On the other hand, it was also an asset to create many trails. But now we need more rules. (Interview ET4\_It)

The theory of Murray et al. [33] on the multi-step processes of social innovation is thus reflected in the interviews conducted. It is clear that there is a need for a systematic and structured approach to walking trails, and equally clear that this is currently lacking. Hence the need for multi-stakeholder governance and a consolidated methodological approach to support social innovation, as described by Montanari et al. [52].

The most important comparative elements have been summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Italian and Argentine Walking Trails: similarities and differences. Source: Authors' elaboration.

Topics	Italy	Argentina
Recent Walking Trail Trends	High local vitality combined with high “improvisation” in creation and organization of many trails A growth started in the last twenty-five years and increased in the last five-six years despite COVID-19	Important national attempts to launch this sector but severely affected by governmental changes Perception of growth in tourism as a whole as well as in walking trails
Recent Walkers' Trends	A more established data system but problems estimating walkers' trends, some national reports point out a growth in flows and cross-cutting features Brilliant but isolated activities with schools, need for more coordinated governance and clearer guidelines	Difficulty having data on walking trails as well as on tourism, no national reports, no clear perception of walkers' flows and features Discontinuity of public policies and top-down initiatives with lack of local involvement
Walking as Social Innovation	Tourism as a regional and local matter, attempts to provide a national frame have not been successful so far	Some national and local good practices but scarce follow-up and a weak regional level
Walking Trails for Marginal Regions	Proliferation of walking trails as synergic and “anarchic” at the same time without a national coordination	“Community tourism” and “cooperative tourism” as a growing innovation for inland natural areas and indigenous communities

## 5. Discussion: Social and Regional Innovation: Argentina and Italy Compared

The interviews provide a rich picture of how social innovation in tourism can promote sustainable local development. However, there is a clear need for more structured governance, more continuity in public policy and effective involvement of local communities to ensure the success of the initiatives.

In any case, following the analysis, we would like to summarise the comparison between the two countries by paying particular attention to the aspects of social innovation related to the implementation of public policies. Table 2 presents the reflections related to the six building blocks identified [52] through the processing of all the empirical material collected during the study and the interviews conducted.

Opportunities arise in general from the university “third mission” and thus from incubators to foster the birth and implementation of walking trails.

As anticipated, there are not many studies about walking tourist trails and social innovation. A recent survey in Europe and Greece [89] points out how cultural routes serve to connect different regions, improving their social cohesion and fostering respect for local traditions. The importance of coordinated and participatory management is also stressed to ensure that tourism development is compatible with heritage conservation. This aspect is confirmed in our research and in the Argentinean and Italian cases, especially regarding the Governance building block [52]. In line with this work, a study on the Greek island of Symi [90] discusses how cultural trails can enhance its cultural and natural heritage while improving the local economy and preserving its cultural identity. The authors show that the design of such trails not only attracts tourists interested in authentic and sustainable experiences, but also helps revitalise local communities, creating new job opportunities and promoting the preservation of landscape and traditions. This aspect confirms the extent to which walking trails, also in other contexts, respond to social needs, and thus what was highlighted in the first building block (Key Features) [52]. Furthermore, the importance of trails as a local development perspective is emphasised by a number of projects, especially at the European level, such as rurAllure [91]. After studies in Italy, Spain, Norway, and Romania, some results point out that even if these routes may be crossed by thousands of people, their impact is almost exclusively limited to the places located directly on the routes.

**Table 2.** Building Blocks of Social Innovation in Italian and Argentine Walking Trails.

Building Blocks	Italy	Argentina
<p>Key characteristics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New</li> <li>- Social needs</li> </ul> <p>Question: do the interviews highlight whether and how the walking trails respond to specific social needs through community mobilisation and social entrepreneurship initiatives?</p>	<p>Growing attention to walking trails as a response to needs for community identity and social innovation, with local initiatives also attempting to meet territorial regeneration needs in some marginal areas. In some cases, trails considered as examples of community mobilisation and social entrepreneurship initiatives.</p> <p>In some cases, walking trail tourism has favoured the development of marginal areas, also thanks to the walkers themselves.</p>	<p>Trails are a great opportunity for the development of regions.</p> <p>With the Ruta Natural, an attempt was made to link rural and urban tourism. The growing demand for post-pandemic trails reflects a social need for outdoor activities and experiential tourism. Experiences of community tourism involving local actors respond to the need to promote and protect local values and capital.</p>
<p>Objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social mission</li> <li>- Social impact</li> </ul> <p>Question: do the interviews highlight the possible presence of the social impact of the trails, including the monitoring and evaluation of their sustainability?</p>	<p>Backwardness of Italy compared to other contexts, particularly the Camino de Santiago (Spain).</p> <p>The topic of sustainability emerged less than expected but is probably taken for granted by many respondents.</p> <p>Recent growth in the sector and therefore attempts to measure and monitor it, but the level of reliability is still lower than for the Camino de Santiago.</p>	<p>One of the aims of the Ruta Natural is to promote sustainable tourism. In addition, it pursues environmental education and strong communication through a section of the website to make all possible trails known nationwide.</p> <p>However, it is difficult to create monitoring and evaluation tools at the national level.</p>
<p>Approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Methodology</li> <li>- Accountability</li> </ul> <p>Questions: do the interviews mention methodologies to support process and relationship dynamics, transparency and traceability in trail management?</p>	<p>The initiatives are not systematic or well-structured, highlighting a widespread lack of established methodology and accountability.</p> <p>A strong “bottom-up” dimension emerges in the walking trails versus a weak “top-down” dimension.</p>	<p>Ruta Natural is the result of a study and analysis of the national context, carried out by experts from the Ministry. In this sense there is a “top-down” approach. However, there is a lack of clarity on how initiatives are monitored and evaluated in terms of social and environmental impact.</p>
<p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multi-step process</li> <li>- “Next steps”</li> </ul> <p>Question: does any phased process emerge in the interviews and is there a focus on what happens after the initial implementation?</p>	<p>Despite the growth in the number of walking trails, many projects are still cursorily managed and volunteer-based.</p> <p>Long-term sustainability is therefore a common concern.</p>	<p>The overall objective is to create a national approach to foster experiential tourism experiences.</p> <p>The focus on what happens after the initial implementation is less evident, with a need to develop long-term strategies.</p>
<p>Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multi-stakeholder governance</li> <li>- Network</li> </ul> <p>Question: did the interviews reveal the possible presence of different actors involved in governance processes and the importance of horizontal networks?</p>	<p>Difficulties in creating stable and collaborative networks, with continuity in policies and involvement of local and national actors that is often fragmented.</p>	<p>Significant local experiences are involved in the RATuRC network, which seem to be launching participatory processes of local tourism development.</p> <p>Difficulties in collaboration between the Ministry and intermediate levels such as the provinces and with local actors. Due to changes in government, there is a resetting of what was done before.</p>
<p>Systemic conditions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Human capital</li> <li>- Ecosystem</li> </ul> <p>Question: did the interviews reveal any resources such as infrastructure and funding mechanisms for the development of the trails?</p>	<p>Funding mechanisms are growing, albeit with some rigidities and some issues with allocation.</p> <p>Human capital seems to be a widespread resource, but it can have the unwanted effect of making trails very “personal” and not very “communal”.</p>	<p>Opportunities arise in general from the university “third mission” and thus from incubators to foster the birth and implementation of walking trails.</p> <p>Opportunities related to specific training (also linked to the role of the university) to foster skills creation, especially for young people.</p>

Source: Authors' elaboration.

As mentioned in the introduction, there are also other Latin American tourist routes that are relevant for the local development. Firstly, the experience of Peru's Camino Inca (Inca Trail), built as a natural and cultural heritage [92]. In 2014, the Qhapaq Ñan (Inka Road system) was included in the UNESCO network. Perhaps the most famous trail in South America, the Inca Trail is a pilgrimage route leading to Machu Picchu. It is part of a vast network of ancient Inca roads that once connected the empire. The classic route is about 42 km long and it offers stunning views of the Andean mountains, Inca ruins, and lush cloud forests. Another significant experience is the Camino de Costa Rica, born in 2018, which is contributing to the creation of sustainable forms of tourism. This is a relatively new long-distance trail (280 km). It passes through rural villages, indigenous territories, and natural parks from the Caribbean to the Pacific coast, offering a comprehensive experience of Costa Rica's diverse landscapes and cultures. Finally, we can mention the Caminos Reales in Colombia. These are historic pathways built by indigenous communities and later used by Spanish colonists. The most famous segment is the one in Santander region, which connects the towns of Barichara and Guane and offers picturesque and historical views of Colombian rural areas [93].

## 6. Conclusions

This study examined the role of social innovation in tourism, with particular reference to walking trails in Italy and Argentina. Specifically, the role of institutional actors in the implementation of innovative public policies was explored. With this study, we therefore want to contribute to the international scientific debate by providing tools to establish sustainable tourism models for rural and urban landscapes and determine the impact of developing recreational landscapes. Tourist trails are a phenomenon of growing interest in this perspective, and the interest in the sociology of the local region is still limited. This study therefore proposes to fill this gap by offering an analysis of the social, cultural, and economic dynamics that characterise the walking trails themselves in the two countries, one with an established tourist vocation and one with a much more recent vocation.

The interviews conducted and the analysis of existing literature revealed several dynamics and challenges that characterise this sector. Trails are undoubtedly a powerful tool for social innovation and territorial development, all the more so in a "postmodern" tourism context such as that of recent decades. Their ability to respond to the emerging needs of local communities, to promote the cultural and natural heritage and to develop sustainable and participative forms of tourism has been widely recognised in both Italy and Argentina.

On the other hand, very different dynamics emerge in the governance of social innovation initiatives in tourism. In Argentina, the lack of continuity in public policies and the top-down nature of initiatives emerge as major challenges. The frequent cancellation of projects when changing political administrations has hindered the sustainable development and the cohesion of tourism initiatives. In Italy, on the other hand, there is a "bottom-up excess", with a fragmentation of initiatives and a lack of coordinated governance. There is a lack of a unifying national framework that can ensure cohesion and long-term sustainability.

Another crucial aspect that emerged is the importance of local networks and community involvement. In Italy, networks of walkers and local associations play a key role in keeping the trails alive and promoting their development. However, once again, the lack of a national governance structure and stable collaborative networks is a significant barrier. In Argentina, the concept of "community tourism" seems well established, but there is still a lack of effective involvement of local actors and continuity in public policies. In both countries, then, investing in training and human capital, promoting the co-creation of policies and initiatives with local communities, and developing stable and collaborative networks can significantly improve the effectiveness and sustainability of tourism initiatives.

As regards some final remarks, we think this study contributes to filling gaps in the literature on social innovation which, as anticipated, has been predominantly based on approaches and studies in Europe and North America. In recent years, particularly in

Social Innovation Studies [14,15], a research strand is developing in Latin America [94]. The most relevant aspects probably concern community approaches and the link between social innovation and territorial innovation. In this sense, the literature on community tourism (*turismo comunitario*) seems to capture these innovative aspects [65].

From a theoretical point of view, it seems relevant to understand the role of the middleground [20], i.e., the community of practices that can help implement a social and regional innovation process. Indeed, from the point of view of social and community relations, it is important to analyse how walking trails foster interactions between walkers and local communities, promoting social cohesion and a sense of community identity. A further confirmation of importance is related to the concept of community tourism (*turismo comunitario*), which is particularly fitted to Latin American cases, and is a promising guideline for promoting forms of social innovation in the protection of the natural heritage and indigenous communities of those territories.

In this perspective, the involvement of public institutional actors is crucial. Research-action experiences initiated in the area of university extension, particularly in Argentina, seem to point in this direction. In these cases, the ability to trigger local participatory initiatives seems to be innovative from the point of view of the social process, at least in the field of tourism. Small local initiatives seem to be starting in Italy as well, led by research teams from universities that are well established in small local contexts.

In conclusion, walking trails represent an important opportunity to promote social innovation and sustainable development of local communities. However, to realise this potential to the fullest, challenges related to fragmented initiatives, lack of policy continuity and lack of coordinated governance must be overcome. With regard to these management implications, this study can be useful to both policy-makers and practitioners for the implementation of walking trails. One of the main results is the importance of multi-stakeholder governance with public, private, and third sector actors in the promotion and management of the trails. The key role of community participation, i.e., the active involvement of local communities to ensure the sustainability and social appropriation of initiatives, has emerged as well. At the same time, a need for more rigorous and systematic measurement and monitoring is undeniable, for the walking trails in the Italian case and for the whole tourism sector in the Argentine one.

A limitation of this study is the lack of similar attempts. This has clearly made the construction of rigorous research tools more difficult (we recalled that the research questions were created by the authors from their previous studies). In spite of this, we are still convinced of the importance of focusing on the national level even for sectors with a 'high local vocation' regarding tourism of walking trails. As regards the social innovation building blocks that guided our analysis, the model can obviously be improved. For example, there is a lack of in-depth consideration on the biophysical component, which is certainly fundamental for walking trails and should be the subject of specific studies. At the same time, a comparative analysis with closer and more similar cases could be considered: the Latin American ones for the Argentinean case, and the European ones for the Italian case.

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