


Article

Social Innovation in Olive Oil Cooperatives: A Case Study in Southern Spain

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Abstract: Recent years have witnessed a notable increase in the implementation of social innovation strategies for creating products with major social impact. Despite the lack of conceptual clarity still surrounding the term, social innovation, as a participatory research method, is finding scope for growth in agricultural cooperatives, whether in the areas of R&D and knowledge transfer, or in the commercialization of innovative products. Society has underscored the need for change in the environment and the implementation of new projects that help improve socioeconomic living conditions, promoting territorial development through social transformation. In the case of cooperativism in the olive oil industry in southern Spain, cooperatives are responsible for 70% of the oil produced there. As such, the actions carried out under their influence have a huge impact on the population and serve as tools that anchor people to their municipalities. This article analyses a case study from an olive oil cooperative, exploring the development of a social innovation project involving knowledge transfer and public awareness-raising through the label of an early harvest olive oil called “Primer Día de Cosecha” (First Day of Harvest). It also assesses the impact of the project on the population of the Andalusian municipality of Bailén (Jaén).



Citation: Parrilla-González, J.A.; Ortega-Alonso, D. Social Innovation in Olive Oil Cooperatives: A Case Study in Southern Spain. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 3934. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13073934>

Academic Editors: Pedro Verga Matos and Tania Pereira Christopoulos

Received: 4 March 2021

Accepted: 23 March 2021

Published: 2 April 2021

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Keywords: social innovation; cooperativism; territorial development; olive oil sector; commercialization; scientific communication

1. Introduction

For decades, rural areas in Spain have been a key experimental laboratory for social innovation. Initiatives include value propositions focused on the digital inclusion of citizens and the use of technology to boost people’s employability and quality of life, as can be seen in the recent study by the association Somos Digital [1]. However, there is still a lack of interaction between agents when it comes to developing strategic innovations in productive activities that ensure the competitive advantages offered by rural areas meet the new demands of the markets.

Such innovation processes have often been termed “slow innovation” [2]; they are local initiatives developed in response to the challenges of restructuring traditional industries in the primary sector and agri-food industry in peripheral and central regions during the 1980s. In fact, given their particular features and the importance of the involvement of local populations and municipal governments in stimulating the process of territorial development, innovations in rural areas have primarily been related to concepts such as open innovation [3].

According to Mozas Moral [4], companies and organizations from the social economy, such as cooperatives, are drivers of social development and structural change in municipalities; in the case of the olive oil industry, cooperatives account for 70% of the total (out of every 100 companies, 70 are cooperatives). Some international bodies such as the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy (UNTFSSSE), Social Economy Europe (SEE), Cooperatives Europe and the International Cooperative Al-

liance have highlighted the fact that this industry is primarily composed of social economy companies, particularly cooperatives, which account for more than 75% of total production.

Bearing in mind the importance of these companies in olive oil producing areas, cooperatives have long been responding, to a greater or lesser extent, to the new challenges arising in relation to social innovation [5]. In this regard, we can find examples of different strategies that have emerged, either in the search for techniques or solutions aimed at lowering costs and promoting the sale of crops, or in the incorporation of diversification processes [6]. In order to rise to the challenges of globalization, cooperatives must meet the requirements of international competition. Given their profound influence on rural life and the rural economy, all initiatives focused on social innovation and the development of olive oil producing areas could be a key element in social cohesion and rural development. The involvement of cooperative enterprises in olive oil producing areas is therefore critical.

Much has been written about olive oil cooperatives in relation to their ability to stimulate rural development [7–9], but to the best of our knowledge, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to the influence of social innovation processes and instruments on this type of cooperative and on their rural environment. According to Sánchez-Martínez et al. [5], there are enough examples of social innovation to promote the renewal and improvement of the cooperative movement in response to the challenges posed by globalization, particularly competition from new producers around the world based on capitalist economic models without specific territorial ties. The research objective of this article is to analyse a case study involving the implementation of social innovation strategies in the area of cooperatives. To that end, we present the materials and methods used for the research, detail the results obtained from the case under analysis, and end by setting out the conclusions drawn from the research.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Social Innovation in the Context of Cooperativism in Olive Oil

The main role that the cooperatives play in fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) has been recognised in the institutional context by both the United Nations Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy and the International Cooperative Alliance's Cooperatives Europe [10,11]. There is also extensive economic literature that demonstrates the alignment of cooperatives with SDG. These are business organisations whose management is designed to benefit all stakeholders, boosting economic development in their business areas [12].

Global olive oil production is registering continuous growth, linked not only to a steady expansion in the area dedicated to olive cultivation but also to an increase in the irrigated area and the introduction of technological improvements [13]. According to data from the International Olive Council [14,15], if we compare the 1990/91 season (when 1,453,000 tonnes of olive oil were produced) with the 2018/19 season (when 3,131,000 tonnes were produced worldwide), we can see that production has doubled, and forecasts indicate continuing growth. Looking at the countries responsible for this increase, while the cultivation of olive trees for oil production has traditionally been concentrated in the countries of the Mediterranean basin, there are more and more territories that, despite not having traditional olive groves, are responsible for a growing share of production [16].

As can be inferred from the figures cited above, in the domestic market, the supply greatly exceeds the demand. This translates into a substantial surplus, which creates many problems at the national and international level [16]. As a result, companies have to innovate and offer new alternatives for the commercialization of olive oils that promote ongoing territorial development.

In Spain, there are many undifferentiated private brands on sale. Almost 70% of all olive oil in Spain is sold under a store brand [17]; thus, with few exceptions, producing companies' private labels do not have much of an impact. In view of this situation, there is

a need to introduce innovative strategies that bring a differential added value to both the production and commercialization of olive oils. One such strategy may be social innovation.

While there have been numerous attempts to define it [18–23], there is still no consensus in the scientific community as to the definition of the term “social innovation”. BEPA’s [18] attempt at defining social innovation views it through the prism of three perspectives: (1) social demand, (2) the socioeconomic challenge for society as a whole, and (3) systemic changes in the direction of a more participatory society.

In the study on the meaning of social innovation by Hernández-Ascanio et al. [24], the authors argue that there is ambiguity in the efforts to establish a definition, despite the various attempts made to systematize the concept. They suggest that the “content of social innovation” can help to shed light on the matter through its different conceptual dimensions. These dimensions may variously include the objective of meeting social needs, identifying society’s demands, and establishing processes of social transformation [24].

In his recent review on social innovation as a participatory research method, Hernández-Ascanio [25] addresses the collaborative nature of social innovation from a research-action perspective. This type of practice—which Thiollent [26] describes as empirically-based social research designed and implemented so as to be closely associated with an action or the solution to a collective problem, and with the cooperative or participatory involvement of researchers and participants representative of the situation or the problem—places the capacity for social transformation at the very core of social innovation.

Social innovation thus constitutes a tool that enhances the development of a territory through the relationships between the individuals who share it [27], while also opening up new channels of communication between organizations and their surroundings [28]. Furthermore, it is a source of systemic organizational and cultural changes, which influence both general attitudes and values as well as organizational processes, structures, strategies and policies as well as methodologies, processes and links between the actors involved [29].

The Oslo Manual drawn up by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [30] includes references to innovation viewed from an economic perspective as a means of increasing the productivity and competitiveness of a company and helping reduce production costs as well as opening up new markets. In this regard, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), as a tool for fostering social innovation, forms part of current societal demands for businesses to give back to their surroundings some of the benefits they obtain through their business activity [31].

The social mission of social entrepreneurs is not to meet already existing demands but rather to meet new needs or offer new ways of responding to social demands, thus acting as agents of change [32,33]. As an entrepreneurial ecosystem of a social nature, cooperatives take on the role of institutional entrepreneurs [34], spearheading collective action in support of rural economic development. Moreover, at the local level these companies are a central pillar of the development potential of rural areas [35]. For regions that are highly specialized as producing areas, as is the case with olive oil in various parts of Andalusia, authors such as Sánchez-Martínez et al. [5] state that cooperatives act as organizations that not only drive the economic performance of the municipalities where they are located, but are also instruments of social cohesion [36]. Therefore, the actions undertaken by cooperatives are collective goods in the sense that they benefit rural society as a whole due to their multiplier effect on farmers and other local activities.

2.2. Context and Case Study

Olive oil production in Andalusia, a region in southern Spain, represents a significant share of total global production. Olive oil producing cooperatives are considered a driver of change and territorial development, particularly development in rural areas; indeed, this type of social economy company tends to be the most important business structure in Andalusian municipalities [37].

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the emergence of the first cooperative business models developed around olive oil. In the case study in question, in the municipal-

ity of Bailén (Jaén), two olive oil cooperatives were established. In 2009, these cooperatives merged into a single cooperative intended as a predominantly social entity committed to agribusiness and high tech. The result of said merger was the cooperative Picualia, a powerful, modern oil mill particularly renowned for the olive variety it uses, namely, Picual.

The merger process planted the seed for the social innovation projects that have been emerging in recent years. The current mill is located in one of the foremost olive oil producing regions in the world, and it is one of the most recognized companies worldwide in the production and commercialization of homegrown olive oils. Indeed, it has won major awards, such as the title of 2016 Best Olive Oil Mill in Spain granted by the Spanish Association of Olive Municipalities (AEMO). To date, this cooperative company has won more than 50 national and international awards.

According to the case studies and the contextualization of the cooperative sector presented by Sánchez-Martínez et al. [5], the Picualia agricultural cooperative sets an example as an innovation model, especially in terms of the methods created for remunerating those partners who strive to achieve a higher quality product. Among the most noteworthy measures are the different levels of payment to producers according to the type of olive harvest, with higher payments when the olives are picked directly from the tree than when they are collected off the ground. More recently, an exhaustive classification has been used to reflect the differences in the product delivered by each of the harvesters. The classification relies on an overall quality index, which enables the launch of projects such as First Day of Harvest.

3. Methodology

This study is aimed at analysing the impact of implementing social innovation strategies in the commercialization of a specific olive oil product; namely, early harvest extra virgin olive oil (EVOO). To that end, a cooperative located in one of the world's main olive oil producing areas is taken as a case study. The cooperative in question is located in Bailén (Jaén). For the last five years, it has opted for the early harvest system and has marketed the EVOO First Day of Harvest.

The methodology thus centres around a case study, examined from a perspective that allows us to evaluate the added value with respect to the marketing, recognition, design and artistic value. In so doing, we can assess the impact of early harvesting as a social innovation formula applied to the cooperative olive oil production industry.

Data Collection and Analysis

Regarding the data collection for the analysis of the case study, we have reviewed recent studies that use methods based on the OECD's REEIS criteria (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability) for evaluating development programmes [35–38]. Thus, this article is grounded in the application of a holistic perspective to the study of a specific case, involving the interpretation of all the different factors that interact in a project of this type. As such, we opt for the use of a qualitative method.

First, in the Table 1 below, we describe the different actors involved in the production of the early harvest olive oil called "First Day of Harvest".

It should be noted that the incorporation of elements of design and artistic expression on the product label, as well as elements relating to communication and scientific research, is a differentiating factor contributing added value. It represents the outcome of an eminently personal artistic inquiry, with social innovation used as a tool to spark reflective, creative and interpretative artistic processes [39]. Moreover, it makes innovative use of retail sales of early harvest EVOO as a channel for the transfer of scientific knowledge.

In this regard, social innovation as a methodological tool for the transfer of scientific knowledge has also been addressed in various recent case studies in the field of arts-based research [39]. These studies are related to the perspective of the agent of innovation and the social entrepreneur, the creation of new scientific and cultural heritage elements, and a perspective that links art, research and education, in line with the postulates of Irwin [40].

They also deal with the generation of opportunities for disadvantaged groups through the implementation of creative and innovative strategies based on artistic methods.

Table 1. Actors involved.

Category of Participant	Description/Role	Added Value
Farmer	Farmers selected for early harvest based on the quality of their fruit. They are responsible for cultivating, tending to and picking the fruit, in other words, up to the point where it is taken to the cooperative.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased profitability by setting a minimum price per harvest. • Greater oversight and monitoring of the farm in order to improve the harvesting and prevent pests that affect the harvest.
Cooperative	Entity that is responsible for processing the fruit and making it into early harvest olive oil. In addition, it is responsible for the management, bottling and sale of the oil. Lastly, the cooperative is responsible for paying the farmer for the processed fruit.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shorter processing times and therefore lower costs due to planned early picking. • Job creation linked to the social innovation project. • Improved brand awareness and image with the creation of a special format and label.
Customers	Olive oil consumers who are willing to buy this type of product.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy properties and higher polyphenol content as it is an early harvest oil, with a higher concentration of natural antioxidants. • Valuation of the product as exclusive or unique; in terms of aesthetics and design, there is a different theme every year, making the different editions collector items. • Consumption of this product is enjoyed as an experience since First Day of Harvest oil incorporates the added value of a story that engages their interest.
Distributors	Network of distributors and commercial agents who sell the product in different geographical areas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening up new markets (internationalization). • Improved image in the portfolio of available products. • Increased brand awareness by offering high quality products.

Source: By the authors.

4. Results and Discussion

Social innovation applied to the case in question is aimed at bringing value to farmers in olive oil producing areas, specifically to those who belong to the Picualia cooperative. Thus, we should first describe the process of selecting and picking the fruit used for this early harvest oil.

A quota system is applied to the harvesting of olives for this product; that is, a specific number of kilos of olive are allocated to the production of this type of oil, stating the exact quality and origin of the fruit. This innovative system has a direct effect in terms of the socioeconomic impact for the farmer. The Table 2 shows the prices per kg of olives paid by First Day of Harvest compared to the average amount paid for harvested olives in each season.

As can be seen, the average amount paid per kg of harvested olives varies considerably. This is mainly due to the added value from the quotas for harvesting olives for a limited edition EVOO, as is the case with First Day of Harvest. By establishing an average production volume each year, the number of kilos of olives needed can be estimated and a fair price can be paid for them, which in this case is as much as double the price paid for a

kilo of olives harvested under normal conditions. In addition, price stability is ensured, which means that by estimating an average price, farmers can invest in improvements to their farms. This in turn has an impact on investment per hectare and accelerates the processes of technification and innovation in producing areas.

Table 2. Price comparison between fruit picked for First Day of Harvest and the rest of the harvest.

Harvest Season	Amount Paid per kg of Olives Used to Make First Day of Harvest (€/kg)	Average Amount Paid per kg of Harvested Olives (€/kg)
2016–2017 Season	0.60	0.60
2017–2018 Season	0.70	0.68
2018–2019 Season	0.80	0.42
2019–2020 Season	0.70	0.35
2020–2021 Season	0.70	0.38

Source: By the authors.

Over time we see an increase in the number of farmers participating in the harvesting of olives for use in First Day of Harvest, particularly in the most recent seasons. The figure below depicts the number of farmers who have joined this initiative.

As shown in Figure 1, there are currently 123 farmers who have been selected to participate in harvesting the olives for First Day of Harvest, representing 13% of the cooperative, compared to the 1% that started this process in the 2016–2017 season. This is a very significant figure, because this initiative structured around social innovation clearly contributes to the development of an olive oil producing area.

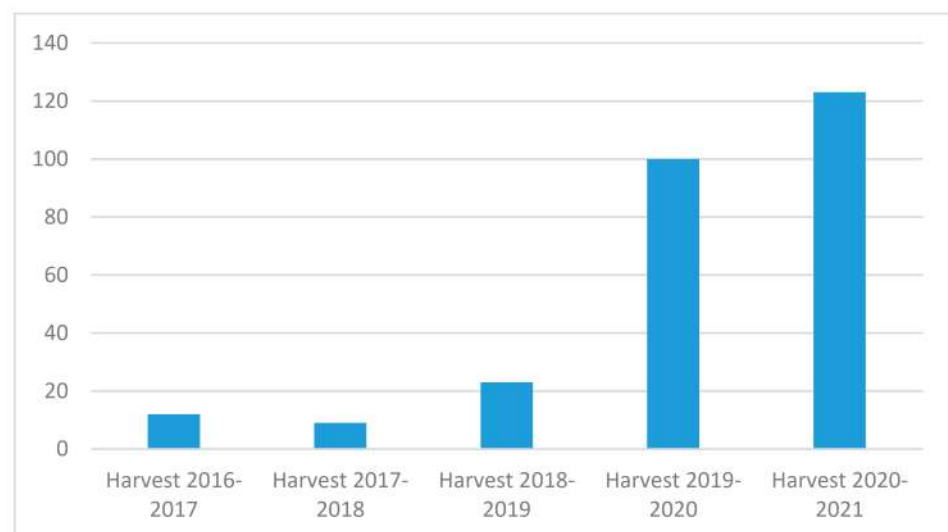


Figure 1. Evolution of number of farmers participating in the olive harvesting process for the First Day of Harvest olive oil. Source: By the authors.

The figures below show the percentage of bottles distributed worldwide during the 2020/2021 season and the annual rise in the number of kilos of olives picked to make the oil to sell to these countries.

Figure 1 clearly reveals the evolution of the volume of olives picked for the production and commercialization of First Day of Harvest. This upward trend reflects the increase in the number of bottles of First Day of Harvest sold both nationally and internationally, as shown in Figures 2–4. This strong, steady growth is an indication of a clear interest in the project by all the agents involved listed in Table 1; it is particularly important for the local farmers who opt for this type of early harvesting using modern, sustainable techniques and who manage to ensure that their fruit are chosen for the production of this

innovative product. Furthermore, this initiative has helped raise brand awareness in a sector as fragmented as that of olive oils; this is demonstrated by the ongoing year-on-year increase in the sale of bottles of early harvest olive oils. To analyse brand awareness in more depth, we provide some context on the thematic nature of this social innovation project below.

The Thematic Nature of First Day of Harvest

Focusing on the thematic nature of each edition of Picualia’s First Day of Harvest, we individually address each of the five designs used to date in the Tables 3–7. Altogether, Picualia’s First Day of Harvest generates a feeling of rootedness, a sense of belonging to various segments of society. It encourages people to identify with the product and the story to which each limited edition is dedicated. These limited editions disseminate information about conservation projects for endangered species or the results of scientific studies on tangible and intangible heritage; they pay tribute to groups such as farmers or healthcare workers, and they raise funds for scientific research projects. The five labels designed in the period from 2016 to 2020 are detailed below.

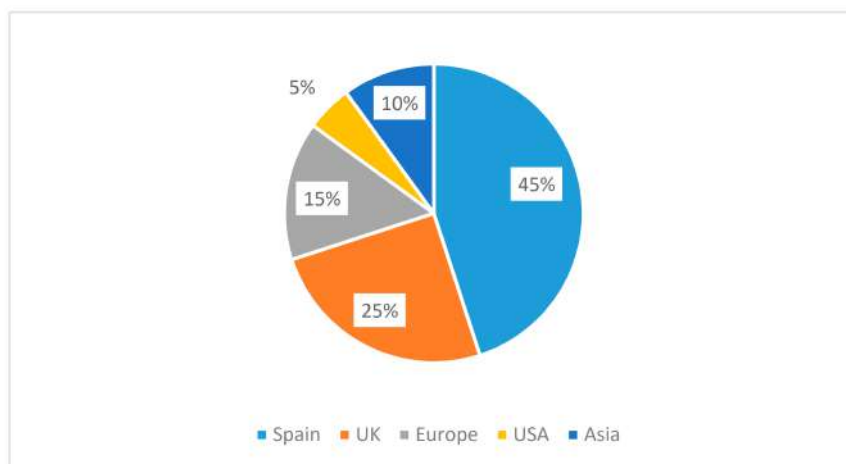


Figure 2. Percentage of bottles of First Day of Harvest sold worldwide 2020/2021 Season. Source: By the authors.

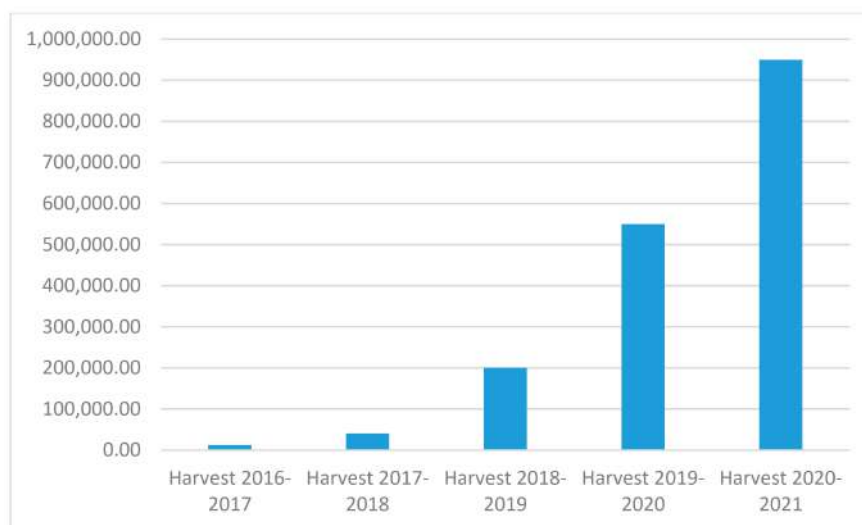



Figure 3. Percentage of bottles of First Day of Harvest sold worldwide 2020/2021 Season. Source: By the authors.



Figure 4. Detail of the design of the first label of Picualia's First Day of Harvest. Source: By the authors.

Table 3. First Day of Harvest 2016: the Iberian lynx in the olive grove.


	No. of bottles of the limited edition: 4000	Languages: Spanish	Distribution: Spain
	Printing features: Cotton paper (virgin cotton fibre). Golden stamping. Silver glitter varnish. Four-colour printing. Embossing. Screen-printing varnish. Information card folded in the middle and tied to the bottle with a thread.		
	Storytelling: The first edition of Picualia's First Day of Harvest, produced in 2016, focuses on the figure of the Iberian lynx in the olive groves of Jaén [43]. Specifically, it refers to one particular lynx monitored via a tracking collar by the Lynx Life Project [44]. This lynx lived in the vicinity of Picualia until that year and was the first female of this species to bear a litter in the olive groves. The Iberian lynx <i>Lynx pardinus</i> is the most endangered feline species on the planet and is emblematic of the biodiversity of the Iberian Peninsula. The main motif of the label was designed from notes made in the wild thanks to the collaboration with organizations dedicated to the conservation of this species.		
Added value: 5% of the sales profits go to the Iberian lynx conservation project managed by the Iberian Society for the Study and Conservation of Ecosystems (SIECE). The presentation of this EVOO was accompanied by an exhibition of nature paintings by the designer of the label, which was on display at the premises of the cooperative throughout the 2016/2017 season.			

Source: By the authors.

The different labels are signed by the artist, which adds to their interest for consumers, who collect them or suggest new themes through the communication channels used by the cooperative (mostly social networks). In the context of a postmodern consumer society, the appearance of the new editions thus becomes what Bauman would describe as an “event” [41]. The thematic framing of the different editions of First Day of Harvest strengthens the bond with the stakeholders and turns them into product specifiers and brand ambassadors. In addition, a card folded down the middle is tied with a thread to the neck of the bottle. This informative and aesthetic element includes information in Spanish and English on the theme addressed in the edition in question, as well as a thumbnail of the main image of the label and even QR codes linking to the projects chosen to receive a percentage of profits. In this way, social innovation can also be aligned with the objectives of the circular economy, as evidenced by the investigations carried out by

Kristoffersen et al. [42], through the use of enabling technologies that can achieve a high impact on this type of Projects.

Table 4. First Day of Harvest 2017: clay, distinctive feature of the local identity.

	No. of bottles of the limited edition: 8000	Languages: Spanish	Distribution: Spain
	<p>Printing features: Cotton paper (virgin cotton fibre). Golden stamping. Silver glitter varnish. Four-colour printing. Embossing. Screen-printing varnish. Information card folded in the middle and tied to the bottle with a thread.</p>		
	<p>Storytelling: This strongly conceptual label pays tribute to the tradition of pottery in the town where the cooperative is located. The use of ceramic vessels to transport goods in the Mediterranean basin is closely linked to the spread of olive groves out of the Fertile Crescent dating back to 3000 BC, when the Phoenicians used their maritime and trade routes to distribute olive plants all along the Mediterranean coast, resulting in the current geographical area dedicated to olive cultivation [45]. The design is also centred around the fingerprints pressed into fired ceramics, representing the historical links between pottery and the bottling and transportation of olive oil.</p>		
	<p>Added value: Showcasing of artistic ceramics. A large number of craft potters gathered together to proclaim the history of pottery as a distinctive feature of the local identity. During the presentation of this EVOO, a talk was given by Juan Jesús Padilla Fernández, recipient of the University of Granada's Award for Excellence for his doctoral thesis on identities, culture and ceramic materiality [46], from whose work this label draws its inspiration.</p>		


Source: By the authors.

Table 5. First Day of Harvest 2018: Tribute to farmers.

	No. of bottles of the limited edition: 15,000	Languages: Spanish, English, Arabic.	Distribution: Spain, Europe, USA, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia.
	<p>Printing features: <i>Tintoretto</i> paper (anti-stain treatment). Golden stamping. Silver glitter varnish. Four-colour printing. Embossing. Screen-printing varnish. Information card folded in the middle and tied to the bottle with a thread.</p>		
	<p>Storytelling: Through a colourful illustration of local customs, the daily reality of a couple of Twentieth century labourers is reflected. The image depicts a man and woman, working on equal terms, as well as an imposing centuries-old olive tree and traditional tools used for the ancient work of olive picking. The scene is centred around a tool widely used in pre-industrial harvesting, commonly known in Spanish as a <i>criba</i> (sieve) or <i>limpia</i>. Before the mechanization of olive groves, it was used to separate the olive from the leaves and twigs after harvesting. The picturesque scene is brought to life through the realistic representation of light and shadows, with the light filtering through the branches of the olive tree. The trunk and crown of the tree fill the label, which provides a window on the past and on the <i>wisdom, art and customs linked to traditional olive groves</i> [47].</p>		
	<p>Added value: Showcasing the profession of farmer at a time of falling prices for cultivating olives. Various local cultural associations participated in the presentation of this EVOO, extolling the figure of the farmer through the arts.</p>		


Source: By the authors.

Table 6. First Day of Harvest 2019: the owl, emblematic bird of the olive grove.

	No. of bottles of the limited edition: 20,000	Languages: Spanish, English, German, French and Arabic.	Distribution: Spain, Europe, USA, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia.
	<p>Printing features: <i>Tintoretto</i> paper (anti-stain treatment). Golden stamping. Silver glitter varnish. Four-colour printing. Embossing. Screen-printing varnish. Information card folded in the middle and tied to the bottle with a thread.</p>		
	<p>Storytelling: The proposal for 2019 represented the figure of an owl emerging from the trunk of an olive tree. A symbolic species linked to olive cultivation and the culture and heritage of the Mediterranean environment, this small nocturnal bird of prey has given rise to sayings passed down from generation to generation, one of the most well known of which is <i>Cada mochuelo a su olivo</i> (literally, “Every owl in its own olive tree”, roughly equivalent to “Every man to his trade”). This label fulfils a dual educational and informational purpose. On the one hand, it recalls the myth of Athena through the symbolic figure of the bird that accompanies the goddess of wisdom, handicraft and warfare [48]. On the other hand, it is aimed at raising awareness of the delicate situation facing the species linked to the olive grove ecosystem; studies investigating their declining populations show how they are threatened with the loss of their habitat due to changes in the management of herbaceous cover crops traditionally used in olive groves [49].</p>		
<p>Added value: Spreading the message about the delicate situation facing the birdlife and other species associated with the biodiversity of olive grove ecosystems. In addition, a photography exhibition was held in the premises of the cooperative, focused on reflecting the biodiversity of the olive grove ecosystem, with photographs taken by photographers from conservation organizations.</p>			

Source: By the authors.

Table 7. First Day of Harvest 2020: Tribute to healthcare workers.

	No. of bottles of the limited edition: 23,000	Languages: Spanish, English, German, French and Arabic.	Distribution: Spain, Europe, USA, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia.
	<p>Printing features: <i>Tintoretto</i> paper (anti-stain treatment). Golden stamping. Silver glitter varnish. Four-colour printing. Embossing. Screen-printing varnish. Information card folded in the middle and tied to the bottle with a thread.</p>		
	<p>Storytelling: This edition pays tribute to the spirit of sacrifice, professionalism and commitment of healthcare workers during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The image is an illustration of two hands clapping. The outline of the hands encloses a deliberately hazy, somewhat abstract depiction of a group of healthcare professionals. The focus is drawn to the colour palette, dominated by blue, white, grey and turquoise, the standard colours of the protective equipment used by healthcare workers.</p>		
<p>Added value: Picualia decided to donate 5% of the profits of this EVOO to the Branyas Project, the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) and Farmacia de Dalt, which is investigating the impact of COVID-19 in care homes for the elderly.</p>			

Source: By the authors.

5. Conclusions

This article has analysed a case study of an olive oil cooperative in southern Spain, exploring the development of a social innovation project involving knowledge transfer and public awareness-raising through the label of an early harvest olive oil called First Day of Harvest. It also assesses the impact of the project on the population of the Andalusian municipality of Bailén (Jaén).

In conclusion, the implementation of social innovation mechanisms and strategies in the sphere of cooperatives and in a rural context, through the project First Day of Harvest, has helped lay the foundations for carrying out actions such as those proposed by Bock [50]; these actions not only enable the achievement of rural development objectives but also help improve production and secure consumer loyalty. Each edition brings with it a rise in the number of customers and geographical locations the product reaches. This leads to a growing number of brand ambassadors, as well as people who are interested in finding out about the process of producing an early harvest EVOO. Olive growers' involvement in such projects also shows a strong upward trend, as depicted in Figure 1, and this forms the basis of a social innovation project that has improved the company's commercialization processes, while also:

- Generating creative and artistic innovations framed within the perspective of the "content of social innovation" [24], which have provided added value to the main players involved, as can be seen in Table 1;
- Enhancing the commercialization of products and fostering the strategy for differentiating and building awareness of the cooperative's brand, in response to the fragmentation of the olive oil industry;
- Proposing joint solutions with social entrepreneurs that promote the development of the territory;
- Establishing an added value project that helps anchor people to the olive oil producing area;
- Promoting fair trade through payments for the harvest with added value for the farmer.

This case represents a model for success in the implementation of projects and strategies for the commercialization of early harvest olive oil. It can thus serve as a reference for other social entrepreneur projects within the cooperative sphere, which in turn have an impact on the productive system in rural areas.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, J.A.P.-G. and D.O.-A.; methodology, D.O.-A.; software, formal analysis, J.A.P.-G.; writing—review and editing, D.O.-A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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