

Eco-social approach to wildfire emergencies in Sardinia between community social work and multidisciplinary communication

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Abstract

This article examines community social work interventions implemented in Sardinia (Italy) in response to the extreme wildfire event that affected the Montiferru-Planargia area in 2021. Drawing on the theoretical framework of eco-social work and the principles of Relational Social Work, the study investigates the interplay between public risk communication and community-based social work practices in insular contexts characterized by environmental, social, and infrastructural vulnerabilities. The analysis argues that multidisciplinary collaboration and stronger institutional recognition of social work are key enabling conditions for developing inclusive, place-based disaster management models oriented toward community resilience.

Methodologically, the study adopts a descriptive case study design within a mixed methods framework. The qualitative component is based on a content analysis of institutional documents at the regional and municipal levels (2014-2022), focusing on risk and crisis communication strategies. The quantitative component draws on a survey administered to social workers operating in the affected areas to explore professional roles, practices, and critical challenges in emergency contexts. The findings reveal the limitations of an emergency-driven approach to wildfire risk governance and highlight the contribution of social work through its filtering, bridging, and coordination functions. These functions are shown to be pivotal in facilitating inter-institutional collaboration, supporting affected populations, and strengthening relational dynamics at the community level.

Keywords

Community social work, Eco-social work, Crisis communication, Multidisciplinary collaboration, Sardinia.

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Introduction

The increasing frequency of natural disasters, together with climate change trends observed in recent decades, has prompted the social work profession to reflect more systematically on its role and position in managing environmental emergencies. Within this context, social work has progressively engaged with the perspective of the eco-social transition paradigm (Matthies & Närhi, 2016), contributing to the conceptualization of approaches such as eco-social work (Matthies et al., 2001) and green social work (Dominelli, 2012b). These approaches emphasize the person-environment relationship and its implications for assessing needs and vulnerabilities (Alston, 2022). Their relevance lies in the opportunity they offer the profession to influence public policies, orienting policymakers toward strategies for prevention, adaptation, and environmental justice (McKinnon, 2008; Matutini, 2023).

In the contemporary landscape, natural disasters increasingly emerge as complex phenomena that affect social structures, trust relationships, and pre-existing conditions of vulnerability. Emergencies rarely generate new vulnerability; more often, they make visible or exacerbate structural fragilities rooted in specific territories and individual biographical trajectories (Sanfelici & Mordeglia, 2020). From this perspective, insular contexts present a distinctive combination of environmental, social, and infrastructural vulnerabilities that can intensify the impacts of certain risks, including wildfires (La Rocca & Lovari, 2024; Pisu & Lovari, 2024). Rising temperatures, rural depopulation, and seasonal tourism pressure, combined with limited access to emergency services, call for integrated risk management approaches. These must be complemented by targeted support interventions for affected communities. Taken together, these factors underscore the need for a multidisciplinary approach to disaster management, one that can effectively integrate knowledge and expertise from various scientific and professional fields.

In this direction, research conducted by the University of Cagliari within national projects¹ on the inclusiveness of risk and disaster communication in insular contexts highlights the importance of integrating diverse forms of knowledge and competence to strengthen community resilience (Buzzanell, 2010). Leveraging multidisciplinary research teams — where the sociology of communication intersects with the fields of demography, economics, and social work — can foster the development of shared strategies and coordinated interventions. Building on these project outcomes in the field of public risk

¹ This article presents selected findings from the PNRR project RETURN (Multi-Risk Science for Resilient Communities under a Changing Climate) conducted in collaboration between the University of Cagliari and Sapienza University of Rome within Spoke 7 -TS3 Communities' Resilience to Risks: Social, Economic, Legal and Cultural Dimensions. It also draws on ongoing collaboration within the PRIN 2022 PNRR project INSULANDER (Investigating the Strategic Role of Communication for Resilient Islands Coping with Disaster Risk Management) of the University of Cagliari. Further details are available on the respective project websites: <https://www.fondazionereturn.it/> and <https://prin.unica.it/insulander/project/>.

communication, this paper examines the main crisis communication practices (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013; Steelman & McCaffrey, 2013) implemented in Sardinia during the most extensive wildfire recorded at the national level in the summer of 2021. It also reconstructs the community social work interventions (Allegrì, 2015, 2017) activated in the municipalities most affected by the disaster, with particular attention to their functions in coordination, mediation, and community support.

These interventions act as mediators between population-focused communication and the support actions designed for post-emergency recovery. In line with the principles of the relational approach (Folgheraiter, 2011; 2018), which ground professional practice in mutual recognition among the actors involved and in the co-construction of shared meanings, this contribution aims to highlight the role of social work in emergency contexts. Specifically, it argues that, through the principle of relational reciprocity (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017), social work can function as an infrastructure of solidaristic ties. In this perspective, Relational Social Work (hereafter RSW) helps redefine the role of professionals as facilitators of networks and a promoter of co-responsibility, oriented toward fostering collaborative practices among institutions, active citizenship, and territorial organizations (Folgheraiter, 2018).

The findings provide evidence of multidisciplinary collaboration that goes beyond the mere aggregation of competencies. In emergency contexts, multidisciplinary practice emerges as a genuine operational paradigm, shaping both decision-making processes and professional practices (Bauwens, 2017).

Consistent with the conceptualization of the relational value of social work (Folgheraiter, 2018), this article highlights a relational-operational model in which the functions of social work (filtering, bridging, coordination) are intended to illustrate the interdependence among the service contexts of practitioners in the municipalities affected by the disaster, with the aim of extending existing scholarship on social work practices in an era increasingly shaped by climate change.

Literature review

To what extent does the territorial configuration shape the life of a community? Classical sociological literature (Giddens, 1990; Tönnies, 1887) conceptualizes community not only as a network of social relationships but also as a shared physical space. Within this space, social practices, meanings, senses of belonging, and forms of inequality are produced and reproduced. Territory thus becomes an active element in shaping collective identities, everyday routines, and modes of participation (Cois, 2020; Meloni & Podda, 2014). In Bourdieu's terms (1993), territory can be understood as «lived space», where individuals' capacity to move within it is closely linked to the capital they possess. This directs attention to unequal access to resources provided by public institutions.

In contemporary contexts, the survival and transformation of territories are increasingly intertwined with natural risks, leading to the emergence of a regional «geography of risks». Wildfires, which are the focus of this contribution, represent a leading cause of forest degradation in the Mediterranean area (Delitala, 2021; Padula, 2005). In 2021, national data revealed a particularly severe impact in Southern Italy. In Sardinia, although wildfires were relatively less frequent than in other regions, a single event that occurred between July 24-25 burned approximately 63% of the Montiferru-Planargia area. This escalation was exacerbated by adverse meteorological conditions, particularly strong Libeccio winds. Two years later, the spatial distribution of wildfires does not appear to have changed significantly. While the burned area has decreased in Northern and Central Italy, it has increased in the South and in insular regions. This pattern invites further reflection on the relationship between wildfire risk and insular contexts (Delitala, 2021), particularly in relation to summer climatic conditions (Siddi et al., 2026).

Extreme wildfires are increasingly losing their character as extraordinary events. Their rising frequency is linked, among other factors, to the depopulation of inland areas and the abandonment of agricultural and pastoral activities. These trends weaken territorial stewardship (Camarda, 2021). The increasing intensity and duration of extreme meteorological events, attributable to climate change, further amplify the phenomenon (Carradore, 2021). Recognizing the cyclical nature of environmental risks thus becomes a crucial dimension for social work practice. It supports the construction of a community profile through the identification of critical issues, risk factors, and local resources that can be mobilized in the event of a disaster.

Climate change and multidisciplinary challenges between risk communication and community social work

While the efficiency of natural disaster management systems during catastrophic events is widely acknowledged, research (Steelman & McCaffrey, 2013) highlights persistent difficulties in anticipating the emergency phase through risk communication measures aimed at preparedness and prevention (Sturloni, 2018; Cerase, 2017). This challenge is compounded by the need to adapt public risk communication infrastructures, as demonstrated during the pandemic crisis (Lovari, 2022). For a more flexible wildfire management system, public institutions must therefore invest in risk communication by adopting preventive practices that help citizens to implement self-protection measures (Diaz et al., 2016). As noted by Heath and O'Hair (2010), the ways in which risks materialize and the ways people respond are closely connected to risk and emergency communication, whose legitimacy depends greatly on citizens' trust in local institutions (Lovari et al., 2024).

Public risk communication initiatives promoting information dissemination and proactive behaviors (Lundgren & McMakin, 2013) can lay the groundwork for improved

coordination between institutional actors and local communities (Diaz et al., 2016), thereby positively influencing emergency management should a crisis occur (Covello & Sandman, 2001). From this perspective, the concept of inclusive communication becomes particularly relevant. It integrates prevention with civic engagement initiatives that foster citizens' active participation within a communicative framework designed to simplify the technical language characterizing this operational field. The implementation of such simplification processes can be pursued by leveraging the multidisciplinary expertise of professionals operating in local contexts. In this sense, community social work — which considers the community as its main interlocutor (Allegrì, 2015, 2017) — represents a functional methodology for interpreting demographic and social variables that are essential to designing effective and inclusive communication interventions.

How can risk and emergency communication strategies be coordinated with community social work interventions to ensure citizens' inclusive participation? One pathway involves networking institutional communicators and risk management experts with the regulated professions referred to in Article 13 of the Italian Civil Protection Code, as well as with representatives of the various operational units forming part of the Municipal Operations Center. Among these, the population-assistance function — according to the municipal and intermunicipal Civil Protection Planning Guidelines of the Sardinia Region — identifies the local authority's social worker as its reference figure. In normal circumstances, this role includes periodically updating public information. During emergencies, the social worker is responsible for coordinating population-evacuation activities, relying on detailed knowledge of local territory profiles and available housing resources, thus facilitating rescue operations.

The role of social work in cases of large-scale emergencies is clearly defined by Article 42 of the Code of Ethics, which states that «the social worker places their professional expertise at the disposal of the competent authorities for programs and interventions aimed at overcoming crisis situations» (CNOAS, 2020:17), committing to ensuring the restoration of ordinary conditions during the post-emergency phase. However, while Italian legislation on public communication and emergency systems defines the roles and functions of local civil protection organizations, it does not clearly specify the role of social work practice in environmental emergencies. By contrast, in many Western countries, the scientific and training corpus of social work is well established, and intervention in crisis or emergency contexts — both individual and collective — has become a major area of theoretical and practical specialization (Sanfelici, 2017; Dominelli, 2013).

International literature on natural disaster emergencies (Alston et al., 2019; Tiang Tan et al., 2006; Kranke et al., 2020) underscores the complexity of social work in disaster settings, where practitioners support victims in coping with trauma and displacement, offering social and emotional support during family and community recovery and reconstruction, as seen in parts of South Asia and East Africa affected by the tsunamis. In Italy, however, delays in the development of a theoretical framework for social work competen-

cies in this field are partly offset by the efforts of scholars and practitioners to document and systematize accumulated experiences.

Social work focused on prevention and community development remains relatively underdeveloped. It requires greater specialization in crisis interventions, along with more systematic documentation of everyday practice to strengthen its scientific foundation (Merlini & Bertotti, 2009), particularly in relation to networking with public safety actors, as discussed in the following sections. Within this framework, community social work plays a strategic role by activating local networks, enhancing formal and informal resources, strengthening social cohesion, and promoting participatory processes crucial to the phases of prevention, response, and reconstruction (Payne, 1995). In such an operational setting, the generative capacity of social work is expressed through interventions that help transform a culture of emergency-driven assistance into a culture of prevention and resilience. These interventions promote participatory tools (Hossain, 2013), strengthen social capital, and foster equitable access to resources (Payne, 2020), thereby consolidating community resilience in the face of recurring environmental threats.

Research questions and methodology

The decision to focus on the large-scale wildfire that affected the Montiferru-Planargia area is consistent with sociological research on disaster risk developed by the University of Cagliari within long-standing partnerships with national research projects RETURN and INSULANDER. These project-based research experiences have emphasized the integration of scientific knowledge and professional expertise in order to analyze institutional response mechanisms implemented in territories affected by major wildfires. A specific focus has been devoted to communication strategies and support measures directed at affected populations. This line of inquiry builds upon what Deriu (2021:133) defines as «the most impervious terrain, which concerns values and the broad construction of a shared civic sense». It emphasizes the responsible role of the community, which, if adequately supported and guided, can develop the resilience needed to recover from disaster.

Conducted between May and July 2025, the study aims to reconstruct the crisis communication strategies and community social work interventions implemented in response to the wildfire. Particular attention is paid to the communicative practices adopted by the Sardinia Regional Government in the field of wildfire risk prevention and emergency management. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How was the emergency communication system structured during the Montiferru-Planargia large-scale wildfire?

RQ2: How was the professional practice of municipal social work characterized during the wildfire emergency?

RQ3: How can risk and emergency communication be effectively coordinated with responses to individual and community needs in insular territories affected by catastrophic events?

Given that the purpose of this contribution is analytical and generative, in coherence with a case-based epistemology (Sena, 2011), it does not aim for representativeness but rather for analytical salience. On this basis, within the broader horizon of social research, the case study under consideration can be defined as descriptive (Bailey, 1995), since it aims to «describe a specific reality and particular phenomena, illustrating how they are configured and identifying their most salient elements» (Caselli, 2005, p. 16). In the following subsections, we present the initial findings obtained by combining qualitative techniques with quantitative tools, in line with the mixed methods research approach (Timans et al., 2019). This methodology, considered a «third paradigm» (Morgan, 2016), is grounded in the epistemological assumption of the complementarity between qualitative and quantitative approaches to social research, as well as in the empirical richness generated by their integration within a single research design (Mauceri, 2017).

Qualitative component

As part of the qualitative component, the study employed content analysis (Losito, 1996) of secondary sources published on the institutional website of the Sardinia Region. The corpus includes ten administrative and planning documents issued between 2014 and 2022,² regulating wildfire prevention and emergency response measures. The documents were systematically analyzed through a structured data extraction grid, developed in alignment with the research questions. The following analytical dimensions were coded: 1) risk communication strategies for wildfire prevention; 2) communication measures adopted during the emergency, including channels and tools employed; 3) institutional support interventions directed at affected populations. The documentary analysis provides the institutional and regulatory framework within which the emergency communication system was designed and implemented.

Quantitative component

As part of the quantitative component, a survey was administered to social workers operating in the eleven municipalities affected by the wildfire. Six professionals completed

² The time frame covered by the documentary sources examined begins in 2014, as this was the year in which the Civil Protection Functional Center in Sardinia was established by the Regional Government under the leadership of then President Francesco Pigliaru.

the questionnaire. This component was introduced to complement the documentary analysis, as a preliminary desk review did not identify publicly available information concerning the specific interventions implemented by municipal social services during the emergency. The survey therefore aimed to collect primary empirical data to document operational practices not captured in formal institutional documents.

The data-collection instrument was a 17-item online questionnaire. The first six items gathered socio-demographic and professional information. The remaining items were open-ended, meaning that they did not provide predetermined response options (Zammuner, 1996), and explored: 1) the roles and functions performed by municipal social services during the emergency and post-emergency phases; 2) communication activities directed at citizens; 3) coordination practices with other institutional actors within the emergency management system; 4) perceived critical challenges encountered in emergency social work practice. The questionnaire concluded with an optional section for additional observations and reflections.

The instrument was self-administered online in order to reduce interviewer influence and enhance response autonomy. The researcher provided clarification upon request but did not intervene in the formulation of responses.

Although the questionnaire consisted primarily of open-ended questions, it enabled the systematic collection of comparable information across multiple municipalities through a standardized set of prompts. In this sense, the survey represents the structured data-collection strand of the mixed methods design, complementing the qualitative documentary analysis.

The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding framework was initially derived deductively from the research questions and subsequently refined inductively during iterative engagement with the empirical material. This analytical strategy ensured coherence between the research objectives and the interpretation of professional practices while allowing emergent themes to be incorporated into the final analytical structure.³

The research context

Previous sociological research conducted by the University of Cagliari in the historical sub-regions of Montiferru and Planargia (Meloni & Pulina, 2020; Cois, 2020; Meloni & Podda, 2014) provides a structured account of the socio-economic characteristics of the area affected by the wildfire. The territory is characterized by a predominantly agricultural economy, historically oriented toward livestock farming, alongside a significant tourism sector, particularly in coastal settlements.

³ The empirical material was anonymized through a coding system incorporating the respondent's gender, the type of affiliated institution, and a numerical sequence.

The morphological features of Montiferru, including its volcanic reliefs and vegetation cover, have shaped land use patterns and agricultural practices. Planargia extends across the north-western part of the island and covers approximately 331 km². It is bordered by the basaltic plateau of Marghine to the east, the volcanic reliefs of Montiferru to the south, the hilly and coastal areas of Logudoro to the west, and the coastal areas of Nurra to the north (Oppes & Marras, 1994).

According to data reported in the Sardinia Region's Emergency Civil Protection Intervention Plan, eleven municipalities in this area were affected by the wildfire. In terms of the percentage of municipal land burned, the most severely impacted were Cuglieri, Scano di Montiferru, Santu Lussurgiu, Tresnuraghes, and Sennariolo. The wildfire, classified in the literature as an «Extreme Wildfire Event» (Lovreglio et al., 2022), caused severe economic and social damage and significantly affected the agricultural and environmental heritage of the area. The total area burned exceeded 12,000 hectares, including approximately 4,500-5,000 hectares of forest land. In some municipalities, the burned surface exceeded 4,000 hectares, as in the case of Cuglieri, and reached up to 83% of the municipal territory in Sennariolo.

Damage assessment reports indicate substantial losses affecting flora, fauna, agricultural infrastructure, and residential buildings. Although no human casualties were recorded, forty farms reported livestock losses due to death, culling, injury, or disappearance. The highest concentrations were recorded in the municipalities of Cuglieri (367 animals) and Tresnuraghes (348 animals). Additionally, damage was reported to fifty-two residential buildings, with the largest number located in Cuglieri (31).

Results of research

The culture of prevention and emergency management in addressing wildfires in Sardinia

How does institutional risk communication influence the development of citizens' self-protective behaviors in the event of a natural disaster? This issue underpins the present analysis given that risk communication takes place within a complex arena (Massa & Comunello, 2024), access to which shapes citizens' opportunities to be adequately informed. Considering this, the aim of this section is to reconstruct the risk and crisis communication strategies implemented by the Sardinia Region. It further examines how these strategies supported emergency management at the territorial level, in coordination with the population support interventions activated by municipal social services.

The framework law on wildfires assigns regions the responsibility for wildfire prevention and suppression, also requiring the adoption of a three-year plan subject to annual updates. Accordingly, for the sake of analytical completeness, the content analysis

of secondary sources published by the Sardinia Region between 2014 and 2022 enables the reconstruction of the main risk communication actions envisioned at the regional level for wildfire risk prevention. This preliminary analysis provided a foundation for examining the documents related to the 2021-2022 biennium, with the aim of exploring the crisis communication actions implemented in the specific area under investigation in this case study.

Regarding risk communication, three main preventive actions can be identified: 1) the issuance of forecast bulletins; 2) the updating of wildfire prevention regulations; 3) an institutional communication campaign. At the regional level, the period from June 1 to October 31 is characterized by a high wildfire risk status. During this time frame, the Decentralized Functional Center produces a daily wildfire danger forecast bulletin, defining specific alert levels corresponding to different levels of expected wildfire risk, each associated with a color code and a corresponding operational phase. The latter summarizes the actions to be undertaken by each actor involved. The process entails the adoption of mayoral ordinances establishing mandatory wildfire and wildland-urban interface prevention measures at the municipal level. These provisions are subsequently made accessible to the public through the institutional online channels of local authorities, thereby ensuring the public availability of institutional communication. Regional wildfire prevention regulations are updated annually and implemented by municipalities. These measures are supported by a regional communication campaign designed to raise citizens' awareness of the importance of protecting Sardinia's natural heritage through responsible individual and collective behaviors. The institutional communication of the Sardinia Region campaign includes radio and television spots, advertisements in major local newspapers, banners on online news outlets, and dissemination through official social media channels. The 2021 campaign slogan, «Nature is your home. Preserve it. Let's save our nature together» promotes a community-oriented vision of natural heritage protection, emphasizing social responsibility as a key component of preventive action.

Regarding crisis communication in the area under examination, the analysis of secondary sources published online by the Sardinia Region during the 2021-2022 biennium indicates that information exchange between the local and regional civil protection systems took place through the civil protection information system. This system is designed to manage civil protection resources and structures both in the planning phase and during emergency operations. Given the extensive scale of the wildfire, and in accordance with the provisions of the Regional Plan for the Forecasting, Prevention, and Active Suppression of Wildfires 2020-2022, the regional emergency coordinator established an Area Coordination Center, headquartered in Cuglieri, one of the municipalities most severely affected by the flames. A local operational hub was thus organized to ensure continuous support activities in the territory, including the upgrading of telephone and internet connectivity infrastructure. This intervention was necessary in light of the damage sustained by utility networks, including electricity and telecommunications infrastructure. It ensured the

maintenance of consistent communication flows both internally, at the intermunicipal level, and externally, among mayors, regional authorities, and local communities. The intermunicipal level maintained continuous coordination with the Municipal Operations Centers of the affected territories, which functioned as the primary structures for the control and management of the emergency at the local level. This organizational configuration ensured effective linkage between the local and regional levels, as well as with supramunicipal coordination structures, thereby facilitating the integration of informational and decision-making flows. Within this framework, assistance to the population was ensured, including through the involvement of municipal social workers, where formally designated, in accordance with the intervention model set out in Civil Protection planning.

Local administrations called for stronger coordination with the regional civil protection system. Concurrently, they strengthened municipal operational structures and preventive activities, particularly in relation to the monitoring and surveillance of transportation routes at high wildfire risk. After the first day spent battling the fire fronts, a state of emergency was declared on 25 July 2021. The National Civil Protection Department requested activation of the so-called European Union Civil Protection Mechanism, obtaining three aerial firefighting aircraft from France and Greece. These resources complemented the five aircraft already in operation, alongside helicopters supporting ground-based rescue teams.

Local and national media maintained constant attention to the evolution of the fire, as well as the post-emergency phase. However, recent studies (Baldino et al., 2024) show that media representations of wildfires in the insular contexts of Italy's two largest islands tend to emphasize a «human interest» frame while marginalizing a «responsibility frame», providing the public with information about rescue actions implemented by territorial governance structures. This framing also tends to obscure from critical scrutiny the chronic, non-emergency conditions of neglect affecting much of the insular territory. Local administrators ensured communication by combining traditional channels (such as bulletins and press releases published on municipal websites) with the use of institutional social media, demonstrating their informational and organizational potential in emergency contexts (Lovari & Bowen, 2020; Comunello & Mulargia, 2017). At the same time, traditional communication channels were also maintained to ensure inclusive access to information. Particular attention was given to vulnerable groups, including elderly individuals living alone and people with disabilities, especially considering the presence of several residential social care facilities in the area.

Social work in territories affected by wildfires: emergency response and community social intervention

The dialogical relationship between professionals, individuals, and communities reflects the idea that «social work, by its very nature and the characteristics that define it,

has never distanced itself from the concrete aspects of the human condition» (Ferrarotti, 2008, p. 14). The pursuit of this objective has led the profession to adopt a cognitive and operational approach attentive to understanding social complexity and to working with all actors within the local community (Allegrì, 2017), fostering dynamics of networking and reciprocity (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2023). In the case study presented here, municipal social work was required to address a «double emergency»: the first stemming from the pandemic crisis — still ongoing at the time of the wildfire — aimed at keeping families and communities connected through forms of «social care» (Mascagni & Valzania, 2022); the second arising from the disaster event itself, which demanded responses through the planning and coordination of support interventions for displaced persons in conjunction with the local Civil Protection system.

In this specific emergency setting, social workers act as mediators between institutions, services, and citizens, contributing to the translation of risk management policies into concrete and accessible practices that are sensitive to the cultural and social specificities of the territories (Hossain, 2013). Given the vast scale of the wildfire, emergency interventions prompted the professional community to reflect on the role of social work as a facilitator of connections (Panciroli, 2017). This is exemplified by the press release issued by the Regional Council of the Order of Social Workers of Sardinia, which emphasized the need to «give new impetus to community social work, in order to strengthen the sense of belonging and care for the contexts in which we live and to activate mechanisms of solidarity and collaboration in emergency situations.» The statement also called for deeper reflection on «the links, interactions, and potential developments between ecology and professional social work.»

International literature on social work in disaster contexts (Maglajlic, 2018; Anca, 2017) highlights that social workers play a central role across the main phases of disaster management — mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. Through their in-depth knowledge of the community, they can promote preventive behaviors and support reconstruction processes in the post-emergency phase. Community social work, unlike case management or group work, requires addressing a community's social problems through the resources present within the community itself, via citizen participation (Twelvetrees, 2002, 2006). Professional practice contributes to preparedness during non-crisis periods and remains central to intervention during emergency phases (Mathbor, 2007).

Regarding the preparedness phase, practitioners disseminate knowledge within the community about the consequences of disasters and available preventive measures (Dominelli, 2012a). Through knowledge-sharing practices, they contribute to the development of local management plans and promote awareness of climate change, and the role communities can play in addressing it. In doing so, they also strengthen community-oriented social work education initiatives. During the crisis phase, professionals draw on their experience in developing community profiles to reconnect individuals with collective

networks. As highlighted by the field research of Hay et al. (2023), this process involves activating the community's relational assets (Donati, 2019). These relational resources enable experiences of suffering in the post-emergency period to be collectively elaborated and socially integrated.

Drawing on the trifocal perspective of professional practice (Gui, 2013), which identifies three core dimensions of social work (person/community/institution), the findings from the administration of the online questionnaire made it possible to reconstruct the role of social workers in the management of the disaster event, as illustrated in the relational-operational model presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Functions and areas of intervention of social work in the Montiferru-Planargia wildfire 2021

Function	Areas of intervention	Level of intervention	Implemented interventions
Filtering	Coordination with the various actors of the emergency system (Civil Protection, Fire Brigade, Union of the Municipalities)	Interinstitutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acting as the reference person for the population assistance function - Activation of a listening/ support service for communities affected by the wildfire in collaboration with the Civil Protection volunteer psychologists' team - Promotion of the listening service and identification of citizens with greater needs in order to help process the shock caused by the emergency - Collaboration with Civil Protection to coordinate volunteers providing support to displaced people
Bridging	Support for the evacuation of citizens and elderly people from residential social care facilities	Interorganizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordination with regional and local Civil Protection in organizing logistics and support for displaced people, including transfer and assistance for vulnerable individuals - Support for the evacuation of elderly residents and staff from residential social care facilities

<p>Coordination</p>	<p>Support for the local population in ordinary interventions as well as for new social needs arising from the emergency condition</p>	<p>Direct intervention</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual interviews with citizens (face-to-face and by telephone) - Home visits - Activation of meal delivery services for displaced people in both urban centers and outlying areas - Provision of information to citizens on the evolution of the emergency through ordinary communication channels - Technical support for the submission of applications for financial contributions for independent temporary accommodation - Technical assistance in the processing of applications for ordinary financial contributions
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At the interinstitutional level, social work performs a central «filtering function» (Ruggeri, 1982), which situates the profession within the broader architecture of disaster governance. Through this function, social workers contribute to coordinating local services and community resources, thereby supporting an integrated system of social protection. In this perspective, the profession operates as a mediator between citizens’ needs and institutional provisions (Campanini, 2007) and as a facilitator of relational connections within the local welfare network (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2023). In the Sardinian wildfire context, this governance-oriented role became particularly visible. In collaboration with the Civil Protection volunteer psychologists, social workers activated a listening and psychosocial support service for residents affected by the fire, with specific attention to older adults evacuated from residential social care facilities. The filtering function thus enhanced access to interventions by identifying the most vulnerable individuals and ensuring the visibility and coordination of available services. In doing so, social work contributed not only to immediate assistance but also to the stabilization of community relations in the aftermath of the hazardous event (Bauwens, 2017).

Through this function, universalistic access to the integrated system of social and health interventions was ensured, while developing a communication system in which ordinary channels (such as phone calls and email correspondence) proved effective for coordinating volunteers ready to provide support to displaced people. Although there were no human casualties, the damage suffered by local companies was extensive. In the aftermath of the wildfire, farmers reported substantial distress stemming from the

loss of land and livestock, compounded by profound uncertainty regarding their future livelihoods. Simultaneously, they played a pivotal role in responding to the emergency, drawing also on the support provided by neighboring communities. As a result of the civic mobilization that emerged in 2021, the Montiferru Association was established with the aim of ensuring continuous monitoring of the areas affected by restoration interventions, in collaboration with the competent institutional authorities, and of formulating proposals aimed at their long-term protection and sustainable management. Within the delicate balance between listening to individual and collective needs, the operational return to community social work (Gui, 2016) restored value to the relational assets of disoriented communities, containing the potential erosion of interpersonal relationships during emergency events (Sanfelici et al., 2020) and fostering opportunities for social generativity and community cohesion.

At the interorganizational level, municipal social services, in coordination with regional and local Civil Protection, ensured logistical coordination and support for displaced individuals, overseeing transfers and providing assistance to vulnerable groups, particularly elderly people. In the area under consideration, 1,425 preventive evacuations were ordered, especially in the urban centers of the municipalities of Scano di Montiferru (400), Sennariolo (230), Cuglieri (150), Santu Lussurgiu (150), and Tresnuraghes, where interventions also involved the tourist population of the coastal area (500). In some municipalities, such as Cuglieri and Scano di Montiferru, which host residential social care facilities, the evacuation of elderly residents and staff was also required. Older adults evacuated from the mountain residential facility in Cuglieri, along with some residents of the municipality of Sennariolo, were transferred to Bosa, a town spared by the flames. Bosa became the main reception hub for displaced residents, demonstrating the capacity to activate a rescue system with the speed and organizational effectiveness required in emergencies of this scale.

A different situation emerged in Scano di Montiferru, where elderly people evacuated from the residential facility were accommodated in a school building, while women and children found shelter with relatives. In this particular setting, it became necessary to perform a «bridging function» between older adults and their families, who were sometimes not resident in the affected areas. This function proved essential in containing the disorientation of the elderly population, which in any emergency context requires clear information delivered through a communication system able to inform without alarming, while also fostering public sensitivity to these issues (Pregno, 2016). Temporary population evacuation also involved hamlets that, during the summer period, experience a doubling of residents due to tourism, necessitating the provision of meal services for displaced people. In the municipality of Santu Lussurgiu, social services — working in conjunction with the local administration — were engaged in organizing meal distribution for displaced individuals. This intervention was implemented in both the main town and the hamlet of San Leonardo di Siete Fuentes, which has only 34 permanent residents but

more than doubles its population during the summer months; consequently, it was also significantly populated at the time of the wildfire.

At the direct intervention, actions were directed toward specific categories of citizens, entailing ongoing communication through routine channels (particularly telephone contact and face-to-face interviews) with individuals already known to the service. This was accompanied by the activation of administrative procedures aimed at addressing requests for financial support. These requests stemmed from the extensive damage inflicted on residential properties and agricultural enterprises, as well as on the significant olive-growing heritage concentrated primarily in the municipality of Cuglieri. In the agricultural sector, damage affected approximately 300 enterprises, with an estimated total loss exceeding €10 million. In the Montiferru area, 70% of the olive-growing heritage of agricultural entrepreneurs was destroyed. The provision of technical and administrative support was also a key component of the intervention, including coordination at the intermunicipal level. Social workers supported households in accessing regional financial contributions for independent temporary accommodation, allocated to families whose primary residence had been wholly or partially destroyed or evacuated following official orders issued in response to the wildfire.

However, despite the active involvement of municipal social work units in the emergency response system, a sense of operational discouragement emerges among the professionals interviewed, who perceived themselves as only marginally involved in the local emergency management system, as evidenced by the following narrative excerpts:

[...] politics does not consider the 'social work' resource, which could be of considerable help in the planning/organization and implementation of social interventions aimed at the population in emergency conditions such as those caused by the 2021 wildfire [...] (F_C_01).

[...] (the critical issue was the) lack of emergency planning with the exclusion of social work collaboration by administrators [...] (F_C_02).

Although the profession perceives itself as capable of influencing policy-making processes related to access to welfare resources, these testimonies highlight the persistent tension between social work and the organizational structures within which it operates (Ferrarotti, 1965). This structural misalignment is also documented in international research on disaster management (Mhlanga et al., 2019; Pyles, 2007), which shows that social work tends to play a limited role in the mitigation and preparedness phases, while remaining largely reactive during response and recovery. Addressing this imbalance requires a stronger institutional integration of social work within disaster management systems. In particular, enhancing interprofessional collaboration and establishing systematic dialogue with political and administrative actors would allow social work to contribute not only to post-disaster assistance but also to preventive planning and risk

governance. Such an approach aligns with established principles of community social work (Watts, 1991), which emphasize participation, coordination, and shared responsibility in managing collective risks.

Despite sector-specific research (Hossain, 2013; Sanfelici & Mordeglia, 2020) highlighting how social work functions as an enabling factor for community participation across all phases of the emergency cycle — and notwithstanding the regulatory framework that grants professionals organizational autonomy throughout the assessment process — there are still situations in which social workers find themselves downplaying this technical prerogative, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

[...] (services), even when willing to act in the absence of political authorization, cannot enjoy full autonomy in the event of natural disasters, as they must be legitimized to operate synergistically with other actors (F_C_03).

What emerges most clearly is the need to establish structured forums for discussion and dialogue with local administrators, aimed at strengthening and legitimizing the social work profession in light of the trifocal nature of its professional mandate (Gui, 2013). Such dialogue is essential to make explicit the strategic value of social work in decision-making processes, to foster a clearer understanding of the professional role, and to promote policies and interventions that are consistent with emerging social needs. Equally significant is the difficulty professionals face in operating within and alongside local territories, as highlighted below:

[...] Moreover, not all social workers in the municipalities involved can afford to work in networks not because they do not want to, but because they cannot, which is different. In small municipalities, for example, we are increasingly required to deal with administrative tasks, and the true nature of social work is lost among the forms to be filled out [...] (F_C_04).

This testimony points to the growing prevalence of managerialism within social services and to the structural tension it generates between managerial rationality and professional values (Dellavalle & Cellini, 2017). Such tension calls for critical reflection on the safeguarding of professional autonomy, ethical commitments, and the generative function of social work. The expansion of administrative procedures and reporting systems has progressively reoriented professional practice away from relational interventions toward case management and accountability requirements. Although these mechanisms enhance transparency and procedural uniformity, they also risk weakening the ethical, relational, and transformative dimensions of social work (Dellavalle & Palmisano, 2013)⁴.

⁴ The authors wish to acknowledge the social workers from the municipalities in the Montiferru-Planargia area who participated in the study by completing the survey.

Discussion

The case study enabled an integrated analysis of public risk and emergency communication alongside social work interventions for affected populations. From an institutional perspective, the wildfire demonstrated the overall robustness of the emergency response system. However, it also revealed that focusing solely on the emergency phase or on isolated causal factors is insufficient to contain wildfire risk effectively. The scale of the damage calls for a paradigm shift toward a systemic approach integrating prevention, detection, monitoring, and suppression. Although the 2021 prevention campaign showed the regional administration's capacity to mobilize diverse resources, the severity of the event exposed structural gaps in prevention and environmental education.

Risk governance must therefore move beyond an emergency-centered culture toward a long-term culture of risk management. Effective territorial management also requires the sustainable use of water and agro-pastoral resources. In addition, targeted support for rural and mountainous communities is essential to strengthen local stewardship and resilience. Such measures can enable these communities to recover an active role in territorial stewardship (Meloni & Cois, 2020; Meloni & Podda, 2014). In line with this approach, the RETURN projects developed by the University of Cagliari are experimenting with new risk communication practices aimed at fostering territorial resilience and attentive to the specificities of insularity, by promoting preventive strategies capable of addressing the structural vulnerability of insular contexts to seasonal environmental risks (La Rocca & Lovari, 2024).

Regarding population support, the filtering and bridging functions performed by municipal social services during the emergency phase proved to be decisive in strengthening the local Civil Protection system, even in contexts where the professional role lacked full political recognition. Emergency intervention facilitated a rebalancing between the ordinary dimension of case management and the extraordinary dimension of community social work (Allegri, 2015, 2017; Gui, 2016), positioning the community profile as a strategic tool for activating solidarity networks and working groups oriented toward the construction of plural forms of territorial resilience (Buzzanell, 2010). These processes contributed, in the post-emergency phase, to the emergence of new associative initiatives engaged in the material and symbolic regeneration of the affected territories, where collaboration among social services, institutions, and citizens sought to translate into a concrete exercise of civic responsibility. This development is consistent with the axiom of RSW (Folgheraiter, 2018), which conceives the social network as a set of individuals who come together to jointly address a shared problem. From the perspective of strengthening coping networks (Folgheraiter, 2011), this approach encourages critical reflection on the epistemological foundations and social function of professional social work. It also supports the interpretation of the Montiferru-Planargia case as a socio-institutional

configuration in which communication, information, and collective action are structurally interconnected.

Within the framework of emergency response operations, social workers — understood as practitioners (Dominelli, 2013) — demonstrated a significant capacity for adaptation, successfully combining emergency management with a medium- to long-term vision oriented toward community reconstruction, also through the involvement of the third sector. Their presence within Municipal Operations Centers, although not always guaranteed, facilitated the recognition of professional practice within a shared framework of population support. This highlights the importance of more structured coordination between emergency communication and social work interventions, particularly in an insular context such as Sardinia, characterized by specific demographic dynamics and the cyclical recurrence of risks, including wildfires and heatwaves (La Rocca & Lovari, 2024).

From this perspective, the eco-social work model (Matthies et al., 2001; Erikson, 2018; Matutini, 2023; Dominelli, 2012b) offers a valuable interpretive and operational framework for rethinking community work by fostering synergy among multidisciplinary forms of knowledge. Such integration can contribute to the promotion of a continuity-oriented security system (Covello, 2009; Gist & Lubin, 1989), as evidenced by recent regional policy choices regarding the establishment of a permanent wildfire risk communication campaign. Within this continuum lies the renewed role of citizenship from a community engagement perspective. The active participation of community members in planning processes not only enriches social work practices (Hossain, 2013; Limongelli et al., 2025; Pisu, 2024) but also strengthens collective capacity to address the challenges posed by climate change, within a framework of ecological integration and shared resilience.

Conclusion

This study adopts a single-case design aimed at analytical rather than statistical generalization. Therefore, its findings cannot be automatically extended to other territorial contexts. The qualitative component relies exclusively on regional institutional documents, which may reflect official narratives and overlook informal practices or implementation gaps. The survey data are based on a small number of respondents, limiting empirical breadth and preventing representative conclusions about all municipal social workers involved. The use of self-reported, open-ended responses and the researcher's dual professional role may have introduced recall bias or relational dynamics. Despite these limitations, this study aims to enhance both accountability (Merlini & Bertotti, 2009) and the relational dimension of professional social work practice in emergency and disaster settings. From a RSW approach, the findings point to a possible developmental pathway

grounded in the integration of multiple forms of knowledge (Bauwens, 2017) and in the sustainability of operational strategies (Allegri, 2012), emphasizing the active and responsible involvement of social workers in decision-making processes and interinstitutional coordination.

In this sense, local governance systems function as spaces of co-responsibility, within which social work operates as a relational infrastructure (Folgheraiter, 2018), fostering connections among institutions, professionals, and communities. This perspective highlights how reflective and dialogical processes, addressed to public administrators and local communities, can foster recognition of social work intervention within a socio-environmental context increasingly characterized by climate-related critical events.

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